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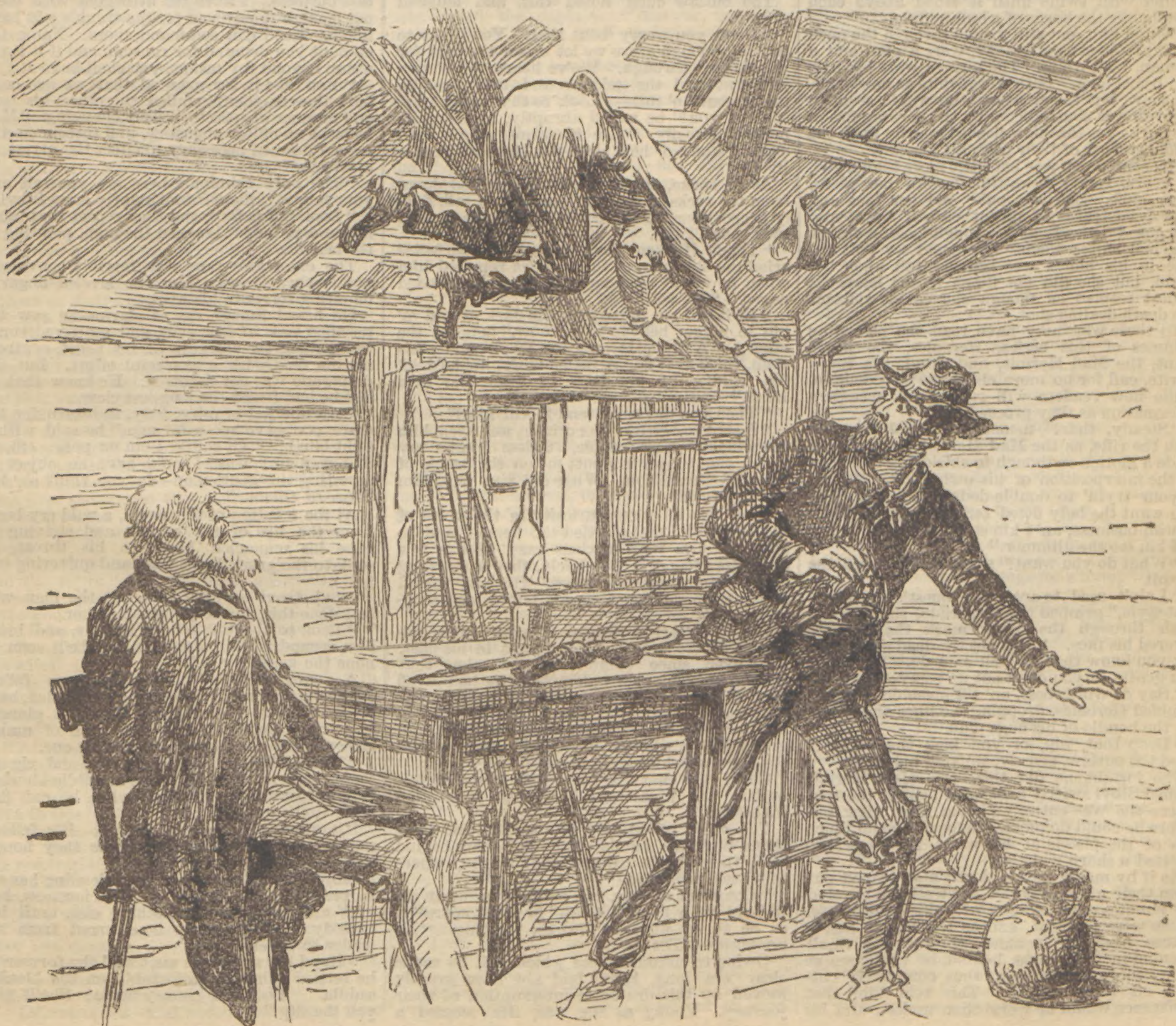
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No. 203.

The Boy Pards; or, Dainty Lance Unmasks.

BY JOSEPH E. BADGER, JR.,

AUTHOR OF "YELLOWSTONE JACK," "NIGHTHAWK KIT," "DAINTY LANCE," "PANTHER PAUL," "THE BLACK GIANT," ETC., ETC.



CRASH THROUGH THE ROTTEN ROOF AND DOWN INTO THE LITTLE ROOM PLUNGED THE UNLUCKY DAINY LANCE.

The Boy Pard;

OR,
DAINTY LANCE UNMASKS.

BY JOS. E. BADGER, JR.,
AUTHOR OF "YELLOWSTONE JACK," "NIGHT-
HAWK KIT," "DAINTY LANCE," "PAN-
THER PAUL," "THE BLACK GIANT,"
"THE BOY TRAILERS," ETC.

CHAPTER I. "HELD UP."

"HALT thar! you two-legged ace of spades! Hold up, stranger—try to pull a gun an' slap! I let go a blue pill through the head o' that gal aside ye!"

A startling summons enough, particularly when backed up, as was this emphatic speech, by a cocked and leveled rifle, held by a man whose head, arms and shoulders alone were visible among the rocks, scarce a dozen yards distant from those he addressed.

The sun was low down in the west, hidden behind the rough, rocky ridge, and the mountain air, though the summer months were barely spent, was cold and chilling in that narrow valley which might almost be called a canyon. Along this defile a stout wagon covered with canvas and drawn by two rough looking mules, had been hastening as rapidly as the natural difficulties of the way would admit. Its occupants were three in number. One, the driver, was a huge, almost colossal negro, black as jet, his head bare, save for its thick thatching of wool. His features in themselves were good-natured enough, like the generality of his race, but the style in which his hair was dressed, lent a fierce aspect to his countenance. By patient labor, the kinky wool had been drawn out and wound with twine until it stood above each temple like the horns of a bull buffalo.

Behind him, but still visible through the open front of the canvas canopy, were a man and a woman, both white. The former wore his hair and beard long. Both were white as newly fallen snow, but the great age this would seem to indicate was contradicted by the burning fire in the dark eyes that now flashed angrily upon the bold disturber of their peaceful journey.

His companion was but little more than a girl, in years, rarely beautiful despite her plain, sober garb. She was pale, and her face and eyes bore traces of recent care if not tears. She gazed listlessly at the rough-looking fellow who had halted them. She could see that the rifle in his hands was bearing full upon her brain, but she did not flinch in the least. It almost seemed as though she could welcome the death-dealing shot.

To those who may have read the preceding volumes of this series, Hercules, the negro giant, the Mad Hermit, and Sibyl, the Snow Sprite, call for no more elaborate introduction, while new readers will receive all necessary information as they proceed.

"Steady, thar!" menacingly cried the man with the rifle, as the Mad Hermit instinctively made a motion as though to shield his daughter by the interposition of his own body. "None o' your tryin' to double-dodge, old man, 'less you want the lady fitted out fer a graveyard. I mean business, an' I kin snuff a candle as fur as I kin see the glimmer."

"What do you want?" sharply demanded the hermit.

"I ain't used to answerin' questions putt in that style," grinned the desperado, showing his teeth through the hairy mask that almost covered his face. "I've got the dead wood onto ye; you know that as well as I do. I'll han'le you gentle, ef you don't cut up rusty—"

"Say de word, boss, an' I'll mash de critter!" rumbled Hercules, dropping the lines and grasping the handle of his huge club.

"Drop that, nig, or you kick the bucket!" cried the outlaw, sternly, shifting his aim.

The instant he did this, the Mad Hermit pushed Sibyl swiftly backward behind the seat where she was entirely hidden from view, but before he could do more,—before he could touch one of the pistols at his waist, the desperado emitted a sharp whistle.

As if by magic half a dozen men leaped out from their ambush beside the trail and covered the inmates of the wagon with rifles and pistols. These were in front, and as the hermit cast a glance over his shoulder, through the small opening in the canvas behind, he could see as many more armed men, thus completely cutting off their retreat. This told him that resistance would be worse than useless, and his

fingers dropped from the weapon they were clasp-

Not so with Hercules. The giant negro was absolutely ignorant of the meaning of personal fear. He saw that his idolized master and mistress were threatened, and he never paused to calculate the odds against him.

Snatching up the huge club which had carried him safely through more than one scene of carnage and bloodshed, he leaped out of the wagon, uttering his terrible roar, for the moment transformed into a wild beast—like a huge gorilla defending its loved ones.

Swift as were his motions, the rifle of the head desperado followed them, and scarcely had his feet touched the ground when the weapon exploded.

Without a cry or groan, Hercules sunk to the ground in a quivering heap, the red blood trickling over his black face.

"Climb out o' that wagon, old man, unless you want a dose o' the same med'cine," cried the desperado, sternly. "Sulk ever so little, an' I'll tell the boys thar to riddle the hearse like a sifter. Tumble out!"

It was impossible to doubt his earnestness after what had occurred, and the hermit promptly obeyed. As soon as his feet touched the ground, the outlaw added:

"Hold up your hands—jine 'em above your head, an' keep 'em thar ontel I tell you different. You, Greeny, take that critter's popguns an' stikker. Go through his clothes fer any concealed weepens, but don't let any o' his dust stick atween your fingers."

A tall, raw-boned, gawky-looking fellow advanced and unbuckled the belt that contained the weapons borne by the hermit. No other weapons were discovered, and as the fellow withdrew, leaving a heavy skin sack of gold in the hermit's pocket, a look of wonder deepened in the old man's eyes.

The outlaw chief noted this, and laughed grimly.

"Don't you worry 'bout that. You'll hev to pay toll enough afore we let down the bars fer you to pass through. We've hearn tell o' how you scattered the gold around down in the towns south o' this— Look to that black imp, some o' you!" he added abruptly, as Hercules moved uneasily. "Tie his arms abind him, mighty stout, or he'll clean out the bull gang—lively!"

As he spoke, the desperado scrambled down from the rocks, revealing himself as a tall, finely proportioned man, looking handsome even in such rough guise.

"Thank Heaven your aim was imperfect!" cried the old man, as the outlaws repulsed him when he would have knelt beside the wounded negro. "He will live!"

"Ef it hed bin imparfect, the dark would 'a' bin in nigger heaven afore now," laughed the other. "A little lower, an' I'd 'a' split his skull, thick as it is. A little higher, an' he'd 'a' bin riddled by my boys to save thar own hides."

"Then you did not intend to kill him?"

"I shot to 'crease' the critter, an' keep him from makin' more trouble. Unless I miss my guess, that nigger kin putt me on the track of a payin' speculation. Whar did you pick him up, anyway?"

There was an eager curiosity in the voice of the desperado, that startled the hermit, and he looked at him with anxious gaze. For a few moments their eyes met fairly, then a startling change came over the outlaw. His lips parted and he seemed about to speak, but instead turned abruptly away.

The Mad Hermit was even more deeply agitated. There was a black secret in his past, and ever since committing the crime that stained his soul past redemption, he had lived ever in dread of having the veil of mystery torn aside. It was this dread that had driven him far from the usual haunts of mankind, and gradually unbalanced his mind, making him the mere wreck of what he once was.

Could it be that this man—this stranger, this outlaw and highway robber—had penetrated his secret?

The chief called two of his men and bade them bind the hands of the old man behind him, then strode toward the wagon, where Sibyl still remained.

"Come out o' thar, gal, unless you want me to lend ye a helpin' boost," he cried, coarsely, as he thrust his face into the opening. "No nonsense— The devil!"

Owing to circumstances which will be made clear ere long, Sibyl had not been greatly moved by this dramatic interruption of their journey. Young as she was, life seemed a

dreary blank to her, and she would hardly have struggled to avert death, but there was something worse in the coarse tones of the outlaw, and her crushed spirit sprung up anew.

The outlaw saw her pale face and flashing eyes—and he saw, too, that those eyes were looking at him over the polished barrel of a revolver, with a glitter that meant *shoot*.

Swiftly he ducked his head and drew back as the weapon exploded. The bullet knocked off his hat, but he had no spare time just then to examine whether the lead had done any other harm.

His foot slipped in his haste, and he fell back against the haunches of the off mule, who promptly resented the indignity, hurling the fellow end over end a dozen yards away. Luckily for him, the ruffian had been too close to the animal to receive the full force of its kicks, else broken bones might have followed. As it was, he arose, his mouth full of dirt and curses, his false wig and beard all awry, his face and hands bleeding, while his clothes bore gaping testimony to the sharpness of the rocks he had encountered.

Amid a torrent of curses, which can find no place here, he leaped to the side of the hermit, now bound, and threatening him with a cocked pistol, cried aloud:

"Make that gal come out, or I'll blow your brains all over the country!"

Sibyl spared her father the trouble of making the appeal, emerging from the wagon, more like her former self, for the little encounter had brought the soft flush once more into her pale cheeks.

"Give up your pop-gun, gal, or down goes his meat-house!" added the ruffian, menacingly.

"Obey him, child; the odds are too great for resistance."

In silence Sibyl obeyed.

"Now, sir," added the Mad Hermit, "let us talk business. I have but little gold with me—not enough to pay you for the trouble you have taken. But I can command more. Name the amount you demand for ransom, and if it is not a sum beyond my means, you shall have it."

"You take it for granted that we are common thieves, then?" smiled the other, his tone and manner of speech entirely changing. "May I not be an officer of justice, and these men the posse I deemed necessary to effect the arrest of criminals?"

"The only criminals here are yourself and your fellow-ruffians!" indignantly cried Sibyl.

"Look in *his* face, and then repeat that taunt if you can, lady!" laughed the man, pointing at the hermit.

The old man's face was terribly convulsed, and he shrunk away from the leveled finger, a haunting terror in his eyes.

He heard Sibyl's cry of alarm—he saw the terrified look in her eyes, and muttered something about the old pain at his heart, controlling his face with a powerful effort. But the desperado was not deceived. He knew that at last he had found the long-lost clew.

"An idle jest of mine, lady, in return for the scare you gave me a bit ago," he said, with a light laugh. "Of course I am no police officer, and even if I was, I could have no object in arresting this gentleman—do you think so, Mr. Howard Glenn?"

At the mention of this name, a wild cry burst from the lips of the hermit, and striving to raise his manacled hands to his throat, he sunk to the ground, writhing and quivering in a fit.

Sibyl strove to reach him, but the man who had done this, forcibly restrained her.

"Look to the old fellow, Kruger, and bring him around. It's only a fit, and he'll soon be none the worse for it."

A young, lithe-built and handsome fellow answered this call, while his chief half-led, half-forced Sibyl to the wagon. Here he glanced somewhat dubiously over the span of mules, then pointed out the best-appearing one.

"Strip off his harness, Greeny, and rig up something in the shape of a saddle-blanket. Only a fool uses his own legs when he can find other limbs to carry him."

His orders were quickly obeyed. His fellows seemed admirably disciplined, be they honest men or rascals.

Sibyl, though restrained from lending her aid in restoring her father to consciousness, had eyes and thoughts for nothing else, until her custody was momentarily transferred from the leader to Greeny.

"Hand her up before me," said the former as he settled himself comfortably on the blanket saddle. "Look out, clumsy brute! She'll give you the slip!"

All at once Sibyl realized the peril that threatened her, and as Greeny attempted to obey the order of his chief, she suddenly resisted, almost wrestling herself free. Then the ruffian's grasp tightened and she was held helpless.

"Don't make a fool of yourself, girl," added the man on the mule, coldly. "No one means to harm you, and you shall be treated well if you are not too stubborn. Go with me you must either quietly or with your hands bound and your lips gagged. Take your choice—quick."

"You shall not tear me from him—my father!"

"If that be your only fear, rest easy. I have not the slightest intention of parting company with the old gentleman. He will follow us as soon as he is able to walk. You hear, Kruger?" he cried aloud, addressing the young man who acted as physician. "How long before the old fellow will be able to travel?"

"He can navigate now, if necessary, captain. But a few minutes more rest will make him sound as ever."

"Very good. Bring him and the nigger along as soon as he is sufficiently recovered. Let the boys take what they care for among the plunder. Now, are you satisfied, girl?" he added, turning to Sibyl. "Will you act sensibly, or shall I bundle you up?"

The maiden was absolutely helpless, and feeling that resistance could only render the situation worse, she quietly yielded to the force of circumstances.

"If I must accompany you, let me ride by myself. If you fear my attempting an escape, you can hold the bridle-reins," she said, coldly.

Not a little to the surprise of his men, the chief shifted himself to the back of the other mule, while Sibyl, disdaining assistance, sprang lightly to the blanket he had vacated.

"That's somethin' more'n common in the wind when a man like him let's a little gal twist him round her finger that-a-way," muttered Greeny, scratching his frowsy head as he watched his captain ride briskly away up the pass.

The ride was not a long one. In a few minutes after leaving the captured wagon, the captain—for lack of a more definite name—entered a narrow, winding trail, which turned abruptly to the right. The ground was flinty and retained little trace of their passage, but the captain seemed perfectly familiar with his course.

Sibyl, thanks to her dauntless heart and peculiar training, carefully noted each turn in the trail and fixed all prominent landmarks in her mind. She could only guess at the perils that lay before her, but such knowledge could do no harm, while it might prove invaluable.

The trail wound upward, reaching a level plateau or shelf some fifty yards in width, back of which the hill rose again, broken and irregular. Not far ahead Sibyl noticed a rude little log cabin, nestling beneath a huge, wide-spreading tree, and rightly guessed that their present journey would end at that point.

"Not very sumptuous quarters, lady," laughed the captain, alighting, "but you may be able to spend a few days here without positive discomfort."

Sibyl slipped from her mule quickly enough to avoid his assistance, then cast a swift glance back over the course they had come. A little cry escaped her lips as she noticed a party of human beings winding through the rocks far away.

"Yes; those are my boys, with your father and the negro," said the man, answering her unspoken question. "You see I did not deceive you when I said that he should follow. But before he arrives we must have a few words together. Who and what are you? Not his wife?"

"He is my father," coldly replied Sibyl. "In return, tell me why you have taken so much trouble to secure for yourself such unwilling guests?"

"An opening for a very neat compliment," laughed the captain, "but I prefer the truth in this case. You must know that your father has lately given evidence of wealth unusual even in this land of gold, flinging away money broadcast as though it were really nothing but dust. He is old enough to know better, and so we resolved to read him a lesson. In brief, you were 'held up,' simply for the sake of ransom."

"And when that is paid, we can go free?"

"Such was my intention. Whether I alter it or not depends wholly on the result of my little interview with your worthy parent, Howard Glenn—that is his name?"

"I never heard it before to-day."

"Of course not—that name belongs to a time

before your day," he muttered, to himself, rather than Sibyl.

No more words passed between them. The party having the Mad Hermit and Hercules in charge were climbing the devious trail which led to the plateau, and a few minutes later they reached the spot where the cabin stood.

By this time it was twilight, rapidly deepening into night. One by one the stars were coming out, and already there was a dim light in the east which heralded the rising of the full moon.

"Take the lady and the negro into the den, Rubber," said the captain, addressing a grizzled veteran, who at once proceeded to obey. "You, sir," turning to the hermit, "will please bear me company. There are a few points which we had best settle at once. Come!"

He led the way into the log cabin, followed by the hermit, whose hands were still bound behind him.

Striking a match, he ignited a rude oil-lamp that rested upon a still ruder table in the center of the one room. Its feeble rays barely sufficed to dispell the gloom, revealing several stools, bare walls and the smoke-stained ceiling or rather inner side of the low roof.

"Seat yourself," added the captain, indicating one of the stools. "If I am not mistaken, our conversation will be a long one."

"There is no need of that. Name the amount of ransom money and I will agree to it."

"Two hours ago, that speech would have been the most welcome of all others to my ears; but now—that girl says she is your daughter. Did she speak the truth?"

The hermit bowed. He dared not trust his tongue just then.

"Then of course you married her mother. Give me the year, month and day of that wedding."

"That cannot concern you—"

"Allow me to be my own judge," sharply interrupted the captain. "Answer me you must; if not freely, then under persuasion. You understand?"

His hearer must have been dull indeed if he did not. There was a glittering devil in the eyes of the speaker that lent significant emphasis to his words.

"We will not quarrel about an insignificant matter like that," slowly said the hermit. "The marriage took place August 6th, 1833. My daughter was born the next year, and is now seventeen years old."

The captain laughed softly.

"One more little count against you in the summing up. My dear sir, do you know you are a bigamist?"

CHAPTER II.

A BLACK RECORD.

The hermit uttered an angry cry as he rose from his chair, but the captain motioned him back.

"I say no more than I can prove, if necessary, before the bar. If you married this girl's mother, as you say, then you committed bigamy, since your lawful wife was still living, less than three years ago."

With a sickly sneer on his thin lips the old man resumed his seat, once more cold and composed, outwardly, at least.

"Since you are so confident, it would be a pity to disabuse you, especially as that point can have nothing to do with your abducting us. Admitting the crime, you have only my word as proof. The other principals are all dead. There is no money in it, hence I know you have some other object in bringing me here."

"My dear sir," coolly retorted the captain, "I have ample proof of everything. I can trace out your steps from boyhood up; can tell you all you have done—and all you have hired other people to do, too!"

These last words concealed a shaft that clearly struck home, though none but a close observer could have noticed the fact, so admirably had the hermit his features under control. With a faint laugh he said:

"No doubt, you are very wise, but would it not be as well to come to business at once?"

"I am not wasting a single word, my dear sir, only trying to prepare you for some startling revelations. I don't care to throw you into another fit like that back yonder, when I called you by your old name—for you looked ugly enough then to frighten the devil!"

"I am subject to them—heart disease," muttered the hermit. "I heard no name—or if so, have forgotten. What was it you called me?"

"Howard Glenn, formerly of St. Louis, and vicinity. Bah! don't I tell you I know all about

you? Sneer as much as you will, I am not to be deceived. In proof—listen.

"Howard Glenn, twenty years ago, was what men called a talented actor—certainly a popular one. He could command his own terms, even though his inordinate love of strong liquor rendered him very uncertain and unreliable. But for whisky and a misplaced passion, he might have stood to-day without a peer on the mimic stage."

"Will you pardon me if I say that I cannot see the connection?" asked the hermit, wearily. "I repeat that I know nothing and care less about this Howard Glenn of yours."

"Have patience, and you may be more interested anon," returned the captain, with a grim smile. "The story I have in mind has all the necessary qualities of a stirring melodrama; love, rivalry, revenge—but never mind the items; they will speak for themselves."

"In the light of his favor, Howard Glenn seemed an enviable man. He was rich, despite his lavish expenditures for luxuries and at the table of the green cloth. He was the favorite of the people, talented, handsome in both face and form. But above all, he was the betrothed lover of a society belle, beautiful as an artist's dream, rich as the most avaricious heart could wish. Shall I mention her name?"

"As you please—I care not," muttered the hermit, but his skin grew paler than ever and there was a strange look in his downcast eyes.

"Mabel Kingstone, she was called. Her father had made his fortune in the fur trade, I believe, but that does not matter now. Enough that this young lady was engaged to Howard Glenn, and that the date set for their marriage arrived. But there was to be no wedding that day—the bride was waiting at the church and the bridegroom was brought there on time—so beastly drunk that he could not stand alone, much less walk to the altar."

"It was his work—curse him!" grated the hermit, his eyes aglow, the veins of his temples swelling. "Pierce Ballou did it, because I—"

"So you are, or were Howard Glenn?" laughed the captain, quickly nailing the admission; but the hermit only growled forth a muttered curse as he sunk back upon his stool once more.

"Never mind; I don't ask you to criminate yourself. Let me finish my story."

"Of course the appearance of the happy bridegroom in such guise, created a tremendous sensation. Both the lady and her father were proud and high-spirited, and from that hour all was over between them and Howard Glenn. He sought by every means to soften his fair one, but in vain. He was refused an interview, and cut dead on the street. Worse than that, Miss Kingstone hastily accepted and married Pierce Ballou, an old suitor who had been cut out by the dashing actor."

"Howard Glenn, half-mad, attempted to interrupt the wedding ceremony, and was given in charge, passing the night in a station-house, bail being refused because he had broken the skull of a policeman. When he was set free, the happy couple were gone, no one seemed to know where, on their wedding tour."

"From that day the popular actor went rapidly down hill, though he never wholly lost his hold on the hearts of the people. But few managers cared to employ him, since he was drunk from one month's end to the other."

"It was during this time that he met and married a woman against whom could be said nothing worse than that she was a poor actress, who had taken to the stage for a living when her first husband died."

"There is no particular need of dwelling on this portion of the career of Howard Glenn. Enough that he sunk lower and lower through drink, until he could no longer get employment on the stage, being supported by his wife out of her scanty earnings."

"Let us jump over the intervening years, and come to the summer of 1836."

"Pierce Ballou and his wife had returned and settled down in St. Louis, he succeeding to the extensive fur and trading business of his father-in-law. They were very peaceful and prosperous, the parents of three fine children. The oldest was named Henry, a fine, handsome lad, of five or six years. The others were twins, a boy named Horace and a girl named Grace, not quite two years old."

"Thus matters stood with them when Howard Glenn came back to St. Louis. Unlimited whisky had not drowned his memory, and he began to plot for revenge. Poverty and drunkenness had brought him in contact with plenty of tools such as he needed now, and he did not lose much time in dealing a terrible blow."

"One dark and stormy night the Ballou man—

sion was broken into by a number of masked men, and thoroughly gutted. All money and plate was taken, and with that the three children also disappeared. Pierce Ballou and his wife had been awakened, and he was terribly beaten, left for dead. She, too, had received some injury—

"No one touched her—if they had dared, I would have torn them limb from limb!" cried the hermit, his eyes aglow, his face terribly convulsed.

"You admit, then, that you are Howard Glenn?"

"Yes—you seem to know all; who are you, in the fiend's name?"

"Your host, for the present. My name does not matter, just now. I have not yet finished my story."

"We only—I only intended stealing the children, but there was some noise made in chloroforming one of the servants, and they awoke. The men with me were desperate, and I was too nearly drunk to have much influence over them. They knocked Ballou down, and she—she fainted when she saw him fall. None of us touched her. I was not so low—I could not forget that I had loved and been beloved by her, once."

"It may be as you say," coldly resumed the captain, as Howard Glenn—to give him his rightful name—bowed his head upon the table with a hollow groan. "I only know that Mrs. Ballou never recovered from that night's shock, though no doubt her death was hastened by the receipt of an anonymous letter—"

Howard Glenn raised his head from the table with a passionate cry.

"Why do you torture me thus? Why rake up the horrible past in this manner? I admit it all—I deny nothing. Then why not let it go?"

"Perhaps I want to assure myself that I do know all—or it may be that I have an old score to settle with you—and sweeter revenge than to see you suffering as you now suffer, could scarcely be imagined," laughed the captain, a cruel ringing in his tones.

With a sudden suspicion, Howard Glenn leaned forward and gazed keenly at his tormentor. As though to afford him full opportunity for the exercise of his memory, the captain pulled off his hairy disguise and tossed it on the table.

"No; you are too old—too dark," slowly uttered Glenn.

"Then you fail to recognize me?"

"There is something familiar in your face, but I can not place it. Have we ever met before?"

The captain laughed, low and mockingly.

"You have changed a vast deal more than I, during these sixteen years, yet I recognized Howard Glenn beneath that mask of white hair—very white and venerable for a man not yet fifty years old!"

"What I am, I am," sullenly muttered the hermit.

"And what you were, I have not yet finished telling. Be patient, and correct me if I make any mistakes in my narration."

"As I said, the three children were stolen, and though Pierce Ballou poured out money like water, setting scores of detectives at work and offering great rewards, all efforts at their recovery were in vain for many months. The only clue came in the shape of an anonymous letter, posted in St. Louis, stating that the children had been abducted through revenge; that the boys should be brought up as thieves and taught every evil thing that children could learn; that the girl should be reared as a child of shame who should reflect credit on her supposed origin; and that, when their evil education was completed, they should be restored to the arms of their loving parents. You wrote that letter?"

"Yes, I was mad then, as I have often been since. I carried the children away and gave the boys to a man who was body and soul in my power, with directions to make them as evil as himself. The girl I kept. I know not why, unless I saw the face of her mother in her blue eyes. From that day we have never been separated. And from the time that I saw the notice of—of her death the child has been sacred in my eyes."

"Yes, Mrs. Ballou, worn down with grief and the shock of that night when she believed her husband murdered before her eyes, took to her bed when that malignant note was received, and never left it alive."

"I know—I heard it all," muttered Glenn, his head bowed upon the table. "I did not intend that. I loved her still, with all my soul. I would have died for her. But drink had crazed

me—drink and brooding over all that I had lost—made me a devil in human guise. And when I heard that—when I knew Mabel was dead, slain by my hand as surely as though I had driven a knife to her pure heart—I believe I went mad in reality. Years of my life were a blank. When my senses came back, I was as you see me now. The child was nearly grown. We were living in the wilderness, where we must have perished only for faithful Hercules—"

"Your foster brother. I remember him when you were the popular actor, and before I recognized you to-day, I meant to question him concerning your fate—for I knew that he would never have deserted you while you lived."

"You know so much—who are you?" demanded Glenn, raising his head, remorse momentarily conquered by curiosity.

"Your slave once—your master now," sternly replied the captain, his smooth-shorn cheek flushing as with anger. "I will reveal myself when I think fit. Until that time comes, keep a bridle on your tongue."

"Mrs. Ballou died of a broken heart, and was buried. As the only refuge from his grief, Pierce Ballou searched far and wide for his stolen children. And at length his diligence was rewarded."

"A plan was laid to rob the house of a wealthy merchant in New York. A boy was to be sent through an opening cut in a pane of glass, after which he could open the doors for his master. Instead, the plucky little fellow betrayed the plot, and the burglar, resisting arrest, was killed. That boy was the eldest son of Pierce Ballou. His story got into the newspapers, and by that means his father found him."

"He could tell nothing concerning his brother or sister. It seems that they had been separated almost immediately after you left them, and he had heard nothing of Horace since that day. Nor did Pierce Ballou ever learn anything more concerning the twins, and as the years passed by, he gradually came to regard them as both dead."

"He left St. Louis, after disposing of his business, and I only stumbled upon him by chance, one day last year, living in a brisk little Missouri town called Clayton, where he ran a banking-house."

"Just how I gained his favor, need not be given in detail. There was a bit of sharp practice, and maybe a few neat lies. You see I do not pretend to be a saint. Enough that when Harry Ballou married Rose Harvey and went East on his bridal tour, I was installed in his place as cashier, *pro tem*."

"From earliest childhood, I have been compelled to look out for number one, or else go to the wall. Such being the case, it became second nature for me to look at each succeeding change or incident out of the usual line of life to see in what manner they might be shaped to my benefit. And so, one day, when I chanced upon a huge bundle of newspaper-clippings, letters and the like, carefully arranged in the vault of the bank, I took advantage of my leisure moments to make myself master of their contents, growing more and more interested as the memory of my boyish days grew clearer, for these names in print were very familiar to me."

"It was the whole story in detail which I have given you in brief; the story of Howard Glenn and Pierce Ballou. For certain reasons I was deeply interested in it, though I never expected to profit any by my discovery, then, but I stored away the whole story in my memory, besides noting the more important points down in my private register."

"What brought about this great change—how came I to be transformed from a respected and trusted bank-cashier into the disreputable chief of an unholy gang of road-agents or toll-takers?"

"You can find your answer in those very words; I was trusted—too implicitly for one of my peculiar talents. I bided my time until the bank deposits were unusually heavy, then bade adieu to Clayton between two days, taking all the bank-notes and gold I could conveniently carry, aided by the favorite horse of Master Harry, which I also borrowed for the occasion."

"Missouri doesn't boast many telegraph lines, and by hard riding I knew there was little doubt but what I could keep out of the clutches of any pursuers. In forty hours I rode my horse to death, then lifted another, almost as good, and with it reached St. Joseph, just beginning to boom and bustle with the California excitement, fitting out trains daily."

"You know what life is in such towns, and you may know how ill-gotten gold burns in one's

pocket. Of course I went to 'fighting the tiger,' and equally of course I was not long in feeling his claws. Cards, wine and women—you know what they are. In less than a week I awoke to the knowledge that I was nearly strapped. More than this, one of the gamblers, who had got away with the most of my money, gave me warning that close search was being made in town for a gentleman who must have been the perfect double of myself. When I learned that these inquirers came from Clayton, I took the hint, and shook the dust of St. Joseph off my feet, striking out for Council Bluffs by water. There I joined a train bound for this land of gold, which I finally reached, as you see."

"I was prepared to turn honest miner, just to change my luck, but the fates were against me. The bloodhounds of the law were still on my track, and ugly questions began to be asked through the very camp where I was then working. I knew that the honest diggers looked upon a thief as worse than a murderer, so once more I changed my base—"

"Must I listen to this?" asked Howard Glenn, wearily. "It possesses not the slightest interest for me—"

"Then are you a most unnatural father," laughed the captain. "You should be proud of the exploits of your only son!"

CHAPTER III.

A VILLAINOUS COMPACT.

ONCE more Howard Glenn was terribly startled by the words of his strange host or captor, and there was something very like fear mingling with his astonishment as his eyes fairly met the black, burning orbs of the self-confessed outlaw. But he spoke, slowly:

"I had no son—"

"The woman you married had—and I am that boy. You have beaten me until I was nearly dead, more times than I care to remember, in your fits of drunken rage. And often when my mother—the only being that ever loved or cared aught for me—would interfere in my behalf, I have seen you turn your rage upon her, beating her as cruelly as you did me. I thought then, and I believe now, that you would have beaten her to death, only that you knew that on her labors depended your sole hope of getting money with which to buy whisky—your God."

"It may be. I was mad in those days of bitter degradation—an utter fiend, if such there be in human guise!" muttered Howard Glenn, as if to himself.

"And your brutality then made me but little better than yourself," bitterly added the outlaw. "You remember how we parted. You were flogging me, and I plunged a knife into you a side. I fled, because I believed you dead, and I did not care to hang even in such a good cause. I never found out my mistake, until I read in the papers that you were suspected of having stolen the children of Pierce Ballou, or I would have returned to complete my work. As it was, I swore then to kill you, when and wherever I met you again!"

"You have that chance now. Keep your oath. I am not overfond of life," slowly said Glenn.

"No; I am older and wiser now. I don't say that I have forgotten my wrongs, or the wrongs my mother suffered at your hands, but I have learned that it is wiser to bleed an enemy's pocket than to drain his heart. In other and plainer words, you shall pay me a handful of gold coin for each blow of those days."

"You have only to name your price—provided it be within reasonable bounds—and I will pay it. Of course, the payment once made, we are at liberty to go where and when we will?"

"Meaning yourself, the nigger, and your daughter?"

Howard Glenn bowed, not liking the ugly light that glittered in the eyes of his step-son.

"Bah! do you still think you can throw dust in my eyes? Do you still claim that girl as your daughter?" and the captain laughed scornfully. "She is Grace, the stolen child of Pierce Ballou—"

"She is my daughter in love, if not in reality. Do what you will with me, but you had better never been born than to attempt her harm while I live and breathe," passionately cried the hermit.

"I mean her no worse harm than to make her my wife," coolly retorted the captain.

Howard Glenn stared at the bold speaker for a moment in mingled amazement and disgust, but this expression gradually changed. After all, would not this be the best and shortest method of cutting the tangle his affairs had gotten into?

"I admit that this is a new idea," resumed the outlaw, keenly though covertly watching the changes in the old man's face, "but, none the less, one that I am determined shall be carried out. Old Ballou is worth a snug fortune, and of course would not allow his only daughter to suffer from want, even though she brought him a rascal for a son-in-law. Nor would he care to press that little forgetfulness of mine to extremes. On the whole, I think the idea a brilliant one. And you?" he added abruptly, leaning across the table. "Am I to have you with, or against me, in this little game?"

"Were I to help you, and the time come when you were to misuse her, I'd tear the very heart out of your breast!" slowly, intensely uttered the Mad Hermit.

"Your blood does not flow in my veins, though I once bore your name and called you father. There is little fear of my following in your footsteps, so far as beating my wife is concerned. The memory of those bitter, black days, is still too fresh. If I marry her, I'll make a model husband. Indeed, I am more than half in love with the dainty little spitfire already!"

One word that the outlaw uttered then, brought back to Howard Glenn the danger from which he was fleeing when "held up" by the road-agents, and his brow clouded.

"Brilliant as you think that idea, you will find it hard, if not impossible, to bring about," he said, uneasily. "Not only will you have to conquer Sibyl, but there is another who may prove even more intractable."

"A lover?" demanded the captain.

"A lover, almost a husband, yet a brother."

"I never had any stomach for riddles. Speak plainly."

The brain of the Mad Hermit had been busily working, and he had concluded that he could do no better than enter into an alliance with this man—Wilbur Glenn of the old days gone by, Wilbur Mason as he may more properly be called. Having thus decided, he now proceeded to make a clean breast of the affair.

He told how his daughter Sibyl made the acquaintance of Lancelot Daintree and Zephaniah Hardy, familiarly known as "Dainty Lance" and "Hardy Zeph." He briefly sketched the exciting adventures which followed with the Mountain Vultures under Dirk Weeninx and Ham Toplong—told how the young couple fell in love with each other and came to ask his blessing.

"It was a bitter blow to me," he added, gloomily. "I had recognized the boy almost from the first, for he was the perfect image of his father when I first knew Pierce Ballou—"

"What!" exclaimed Wilbur Mason, almost leaping from his stool in his excitement. "Not the other boy—not the twin brother to the girl?"

"Yes, I am sure of that. I drew enough from him by adroitly put questions to be sure there was no mistake. At the first sight of his fair face, all my hatred for his treacherous father came back with redoubled force, and I would have killed him then only for the interference of his friend, a keen, shrewd, faithful fellow."

"Day and night I watched my chance, and at last it came. I pretended to yield to the wishes of the lovers, and even went so far as to prepare a sort of betrothal feast. At the end, I bade them drink to the health of the bride-elect. They obeyed. That liquor contained a subtle drug that instantaneously did its work. It changed them to stone—yet left them every sense untrammelled save those of motion and of speech. They could see, hear, feel—no more. And so I left them, to die as I supposed, taking Sibyl far to the north, where we found a refuge among the Plain Creeks, who looked upon me as something more than mortal."

"But I must have made an error in the strength of the drug, for six months later, he—those two, boys in age, but men in experience and daring—came upon us, stole Sibyl away and was on the point of marrying her, when I found them. There was a terrible fight: they lay at my feet covered with blood and many wounds. I felt sure that the work was well done—that they were both dead, and so left them."

"I brought Sibyl out here, trusting that change of scene would effect a cure, but less than a week ago, Hercules saw Lancelot Daintree, alive and well! Most fortunately he did not see the negro, and so we once more gave him the slip."

"You are sure it was the same fellow?"

"Hercules seldom makes a mistake. I feel that he has not, this time. Something tells me that the avenger is on my trail. Not a night

passes but what I see her in my dreams, and each time she bids me prepare for the end—that my days are numbered, and that her death will soon be avenged by the hand of her son."

"I never took much stock in dreams and visions," cynically observed Wilbur Mason, his thin lips curling. "But this fellow—young Horace Ballou, if your suspicions are correct—has he any idea who he really is?"

"No, unless he has learned something of the truth since we dwelt together in the ice cave."

"Then he must never be any wiser. Old Ballou will cut up very well, but three claimants are too much. It's an easy matter to put a man out of the way here—no questions asked, or else the deed is laid at the door of the notorious Joaquin Murieta. Master Horace may find a bride, but if so, 'twill be old mother Death! I only wish the other—his brother Harry—would also put in an appearance. Then I would marry the fair Grace and hasten back to earn the forgiveness of father Ballou."

"Well, let them rest for the present. You say you left the young fellow for dead when you took Grace, or Sibyl, if you prefer that name, away. Does she know that he is still living?"

"No. I have carefully kept that knowledge from her. I do not know how she would take it. There is one point I omitted to mention. My rage and fear were so great when I found them together, with the priest, that I said more than I should—more than I would had my brain been cooler—"

Wilbur Mason uttered a curse of annoyance and disgust at this announcement.

"You let out the truth, then—she knows you are not her father?" he snarled, biting his fingernails viciously.

"Not that," hastily responded the hermit. "True, when I found them thus, I believed they had been married, and I told her that Dainty Lance was her brother. Then she fainted and before she recovered sufficiently to question me, I had it all arranged, a plausible story."

"It was a painful affair, I said; one on which I could not bear to dwell. A fair and faithful wife—a child that was hers, but not mine. It was this, I said, that drove me from civilized life. I took her, then a babe, and fled. But never mind the details. Enough that she believed me. That she still loves the youth, I have no doubt, but I know she would shrink from him in horror were they to meet and he to try to occupy his old position."

"Not quite so bad as I feared," mused Mason, then adding more briskly. "Do you think her love for you, as her supposed father, has been killed? Would she be willing to sacrifice her own inclinations if thereby she believed she would be preserving you from shame and disgrace—perhaps death?"

"I believe her affection is as strong as ever, though ever since that day, she has shrunk from rather than invited my caresses," slowly responded Howard Glenn.

"Well, we can try that plan first; if it fails, then some other must answer. I will not be foiled now!"

"What plan? You forget that I am wholly in the dark."

"You remember what I said to you at the wagon? about being a fugitive criminal? I was only trying to pierce your mask and confirm my suspicions when I spoke, but those words may be of service now."

"I mean to assume the role of detective, come clear from the States in quest of a criminal, one Howard Glenn. I'll make it as easy on your honor as possible; say you killed a man one day while in one of your insane spells. Anyway, I have arrested you, and if I take you back with me you must surely hang, for the murdered man's relatives are very rich and influential. I will pretend to be very sorry for both you and her, and when the proper pitch is gained, I will spring the trap. I will avow my passionate love for her, and swear that for her sweet sake I am ready to forsake my duty, that I will pronounce it all a mistake, satisfy my men, set you at liberty—provided she will consent to make me the happiest of mortals by becoming Mrs. Wilbur Mason."

"There!" exclaimed the rascal, drawing a long breath and chuckling with self-admiration. "I fancy that plot would do credit to a professional author!"

Howard Glenn did not seem nearly so well pleased. By such a scheme he must be still more degraded in the estimation of Sibyl, the only living being whom he loved. But he had by this time pretty accurately taken the gauge of Wilbur Mason. An unscrupulous rascal who cared nothing for his fellows save so far as they

could be of service to him. And he was wholly in his power. To refuse to play this part would only produce some more disagreeable alternative.

Mason was so thoroughly satisfied with himself that he did not notice the moody air of his companion. Apparently, the idea of rebellion on the part of the Mad Hermit never entered his mind.

"Well, that point is settled for the present. Now for this young fellow who has given you so much trouble. Give me the closest description of him that you can put into words, and I will set a couple of my best men on the lookout for him. Once found, be sure the many-lived rascal will never again turn up to trouble us."

The Mad Hermit obeyed, describing Dainty Lance very closely, his eyes closed the better to bring the young man before his memory. Only for this he must have noticed the rapidly-increasing amazement of Wilbur Mason, who now looked the very picture of bewilderment.

"Hold on!" he at length exclaimed, excitedly. "There's a mistake somewhere! You're describing—"

A most startling occurrence cut short his speech.

CHAPTER IV.

AN AUDACIOUS ESPIAL.

THERE was one eye-witness to that "holding up," process, more than either of the parties more immediately concerned had any idea of. Just as the sharp report of Wilbur Mason's rifle rung out upon the cool evening air, the bare head of a white man popped up from behind a rocky ridge on the hillside and peered down upon the stirring scene.

He was young, apparently but little past the last stage of boyhood. His dress was fashioned with an eye to comfort and service rather than elegance, being part buckskin, part flannel. A leather belt girdled his waist, containing a knife and a brace of revolvers, navy size, and Colt's patent.

In one hand he held a soft felt hat, thus making his head a less conspicuous object as he peered over the gray rock. Clearly he wished to keep his proximity a secret from those in the valley below, even while strongly tempted to take a hand in the one-sided game.

"If I was only a little closer!" fell almost unconsciously from his lips, as he estimated the distance that, on an air-line, separated his covert from the wagon below.

Crack pistol-shot though he was, the distance was too great for every bullet to tell its tale, and less than that would make an interference at the present stage of the game suicidal.

Hercules was down, apparently dead. The hermit was a prisoner—only Sibyl was yet at liberty. There were over a dozen of the road-agents; and he only one man. Only a fool or a madman would have thought twice of attempting a rescue just then.

Yet it was bitter hard work for the young trailer to lie quiet and witness all that followed, deep as was his interest in at least one of the actors therein.

He looked on, listened with a painful interest difficult to describe or explain. And great was his excitement when, despite the distance, he heard Wilbur Mason pronounce the name that caused the Mad Hermit to fall to the ground in a writhing spasm.

"Great heavens! can it be possible?" he exclaimed. "It must—and yet it does not seem possible!"

Hagerly he watched, now resolved to follow the adventure to the end, despite its danger, for now he had a double incentive, each one powerful enough to lead him to risk his life on the chance of success.

He heard the parting orders of Wilbur Mason, and saw the outlaw chief ride away with his beautiful captive. He made a move as though to follow them, but then paused and once more resumed his crouching attitude behind the line of rock. He saw from the course taken by the outlaw that were he to follow now, he could scarcely hope to escape discovery by one party or the other in reaching the valley.

"He bade them follow—they will bring up at the same place," he muttered, yet glancing uneasily at the receding forms of the two riders, as though there centered his greatest interest.

Luckily the patience of the young scout was not tested by long delay. The outlaws quickly overhauled the contents of the wagon, each man securing whatever articles struck his fancy, then kindling a fire among the rest, bent on destroying all, thus leaving no clue to what had transpired.

By this time the Mad Hermit had recovered

from his attack, and Hercules was upon his feet again, feeling but little the worse for the "creasing" operation. A dozen turns of a stout, raw-hide lariat enveloped his body and arms, while the loops of two other lassoes were around his neck, the other ends being held by as many watchful outlaws who seemed resolved to run no risks with such a dangerous prisoner.

In this manner they retreated from the spot where the wagon and its contents blazed up furiously, heading in the same direction taken by Wilbur Mason with Sibyl a captive. And at a little distance behind them, taking good advantage of every cover, stole the young scout on what was fated to prove the most eventful enterprise of his life.

Not once did the outlaws glance behind them; so lonely and desolate was that region they never dreamed of being followed or spied upon, and so the young trailer reached the long, level shelf on which stood the lone cabin, just as the outlaw chief gave orders for old Rubber to take Sibyl and Hercules to the "den."

Though unable to hear the outlaw's commands, the young trailer saw the twain led away, vanishing amidst a clump of vine-clad bushes lying at the foot of the rocky hill, and rightly divined that this was the masked entrance to a cave of some sort. He saw the other outlaws disappear at the same point, save one man who led the two mules along the shelf past the cabin. And then he saw the Mad Hermit led by the road-agent into the building.

The gloom was rapidly increasing, but the young scout restrained his impatience until he saw the outlaw returning without the mules, having placed them in some spot of concealment. Watching him pass the cabin and disappear amid the bushes, he then stole silently forward, sinking upon his stomach as he neared the moss-grown hut beneath the wide-spreading tree.

He could see several faint bars of light streaming through the rickety door, and felt that this position once gained, he could not only overhear but see all that transpired within. But he was doomed to bitter disappointment.

He abruptly paused and flattened himself against the ground like some alarmed serpent, smothering a curse between his closed teeth, for noiselessly creeping along those glimmering shafts of light, he now detected a human figure! And as he breathlessly watched, he saw the unknown spy reach the door and crouching there, peer steadily into the room!

For a brief space the young scout was completely at a loss how to act. He believed that words were being spoken in yonder cabin worth more to him than untold gold, could he only succeed in overhearing them. But how could that be done, with yonder spy in the way? He knew that the faintest sound of a struggle, even an exclamation of surprise, would alarm the outlaw chief, at whose call a dozen dangerous foes would flock to the spot.

The spy yonder might be an enemy to the outlaws—his conduct certainly was not that of a friend—but that did not insure a friendly alliance between the eavesdroppers, even could they come together without being overheard by those inside the building.

"It's too risky, and there's too much depending upon it," reflected the young trailer, rejecting the idea almost as soon as formed. "There may be other loopholes—the shanty looks old enough—but suppose that fellow takes a notion to change his base, just at the wrong moment for me? There'd be a rumpus, and we'd both be bagged, either dead or alive. Hal by the Lord, I have it!"

Hesitating no longer, the young scout stole toward the hut, edging around so as to approach it from the rear, moving inch by inch until hidden from the spy who knelt at the door, then increasing his pace until he stood beside the huge old tree.

He listened, but only an indistinct, murmuring sound came from within. To all appearance the back wall was perfectly close, not the faintest glimmer of light shining through it. But for this our young friend did not seem to care. He had another vantage point in view.

Quickly removing his boots, he grasped one of the low-hanging boughs and dexterously swung himself up into the tree. From there it was no difficult task to reach the roof of the cabin, but as he gently and gradually lowered himself upon this, the scout recognized a fresh peril.

The roof was formed of rude, undressed shingles split from the redwood. Time and exposure to the storms of winter had rotted them so much that here and there he could see holes and cracks through which the red light from within stream-

ed in fitful rays. The frail covering bent beneath his weight, and he feared to advance or wholly release his hold upon the limb above, lest the shingles should give way beneath him, or else creak and crack loud enough to arouse the suspicions of the outlaw leader.

More bitterly than ever did he curse the inquisitiveness of the spy at the door, who was thus robbing him of what might well prove literally priceless intelligence.

A few words, spoken more loudly than what had gone before, came to his ears, among them a name, and great as the peril was, the young spy hesitated no longer. At all hazards he must overhear this conversation.

Gently sinking down until he lay nearly flat upon the roof, thus distributing his weight over as much surface as possible, he crawled along until he reached the ridge-pole. This reached, he felt comparatively safe, and hitched along it until he reached the wide-mouthed chimney.

Luckily there was no fire on the hearth below, and the spy smiled grimly as he settled down to listen, for up the wide funnel each word came as distinctly as though the speakers were standing within arms length of him.

It would be waste of space to record all he heard, since the conversation between Wilbur Mason and Howard Glenn has already been placed before the reader. Enough that the young scout, in hearing the strange and startling revelations thus made, felt himself a thousand-fold repaid for the risk he had and was yet to run.

Each word was treasured up in his memory, and so intense was his interest that at times he fairly held his breath for fear of losing a single sentence. And as he listened, while the conversation shifted to Sibyl, or Grace Ballou, his interest grew fairly painful.

It was a diabolical plot which Wilbur Mason was putting into words, and the eavesdropper above mentally swore that it should be foiled, even at the cost of his life. And then a bold, desperate idea struck him.

"If I can get a sight of him, I'll knock him over—cripple, not kill him, for he's a valuable witness. They'll see or hear that rascal down yonder running away, and will naturally chase him as the one who fired the shot. While they do that, what's to hinder me from getting her clear, and making our escape?"

Truly a desperate, even foolhardy scheme, but no sooner was it conceived than the young scout set about putting it into execution.

He saw that only a short distance from where he crouched, the light from within streamed out through a hole in the shingles as broad as his palm. Once there, he could see all that was going on in the room below, and easily send a bullet to its mark.

Creeping silently along, the bold spy soon reached the aperture and peering through it, saw the two men seated at the table almost directly beneath him.

Drawing back to smother the sound, he was about to cock his revolver, when the rotten shingles gave way beneath his weight and he plunged down through the roof!

CHAPTER V.

AN ELOPEMENT PROPOSED.

HAD the young spy on the roof-top been aware of the full facts of the case, he might have thought twice before resolving upon such a bold step, since almost his only hope of success lay in the mysterious spy at the door being wholly taken by surprise when the shot was fired, and on his drawing the startled outlaws in pursuit when he fled. But the bold eavesdropper was in blissful ignorance of the fact that his intended decoy had heard all he wanted and had stolen noiselessly away from his place of espial.

Creeping silently along until at a safe distance from the log cabin, the spy arose to his feet and glanced back.

The full moon shone fairly upon his face and figure, both more than ordinarily handsome, though his garb was rough and travel-stained. The broad-brimmed felt hat was pushed back from his brow. Little curls of jetty black hair fell carelessly over his temples. A pair of moustaches and imperial of the same hue adorned his face. His eyes were large and lustrous, just now filled with a strange light that matched the mocking smile which curled his lip until his white teeth were dimly visible.

Had the other spy not been so deeply interested in the words of those in the room below him, he could hardly have avoided noticing the man just described. Luckily for himself, his own position was shaded thoroughly by the

huge old tree, and his form blended with the chimney-top. For the man who was now looking in that direction, who had also been playing spy on the eavesdropper, was none other than Frank Kruger, whom Wilbur Mason called to his aid when Howard Glenn fell to the ground in a fit at hearing his long-buried name spoken—Frank Kruger, the trusted lieutenant of the little band of outlaws!

With a short, mocking laugh that could reach no ears save his own, Frank Kruger turned from the lone hut, and reaching the screen of bushes, passed behind them.

All was darkness the most intense, but he was perfectly familiar with the way, and stooping low, pressed on through a narrow, tunnel-like passage in the rock.

This soon expanded, and after a few steps, a dim light ahead became visible. Rounding a short curve in the tunnel, Kruger emerged into a spacious chamber, clearly the work of nature.

Here the outlaws were congregated, eating and drinking as they lay sprawled at ease upon blankets and buffalo robes. Chairs and tables there were none. The place looked bleak and cheerless, despite the crackling fire in a natural fireplace and the two foul-smelling grease lamps, the smoky glare from which but served to render darkness visible, as it were.

Clearly there was not much romance about this part of the outlaw's life.

As Kruger's footsteps rung upon the rocky floor, all eyes were turned in his direction with some little curiosity, though none of their owners offered to arise.

"Mebbe you kin settle it, Frank," uttered grizzled old Rubber. "Some thinks the job'll pan out big, others little. What's *your* opinion?"

"I know nothing whatever about it, boys. The captain has kept a close mouth. I only hope there'll be enough to pay us for our trouble, on a fair divide."

There was nothing in these words that the keenest partisan of the outlaw chief could object to, yet Rubber seemed to utter the sentiment of all when he replied:

"Thar's got to be a fair divide! If he tries any skin game, boss or no boss, we won't be the only sufferers!"

"Careful, old man. Think what you please, but don't talk too loud or plain. Remember, I am bound to report any mutinous expressions I may overhear. For this once I'll let it pass. Where did you put the girl? I bring a message from the captain."

Considerably taken aback by the unusual sternness with which Kruger spoke, the old robber replied:

"In yonder, o' course. Nigger's thar too."

Kruger turned away without speaking, leaving the rock chamber by a passage similar to the one leading to the outer air. Ahead of him, at no great distance shone a feeble light, and by this he could see that two armed men guarded the little cell in which the captives were confined.

"Halt thar!" uttered a deep, threatening voice as he drew near. "Who comes? Spit it out, or down you go!"

"A fellow needs to get up early to catch you napping, Lambert," said Kruger, with a soft, mellow laugh. "And you too, Keeble. Good boys, both; but I'll relieve you long enough for supper. I have a message from the captain to deliver to the girl, and will wait here until you come back. Not that there's any particular need of any guard, as far as I see."

Such seemed to be the opinion of the two guards, who, thoroughly deceived by the off-hand manner of the young lieutenant, gladly resigned their posts and hastened away to break their fast.

Frank Kruger entered the stone chamber, but paused abruptly, one hand instinctively grasping a revolver butt.

Hercules had been securely bound when placed in the cell, but Sibyl, after first warning him to be cautious and not stir unless she gave him the word, quickly cut his bonds. Whether by oversight or not, she had not been disarmed, and in addition to a serviceable dagger, carried a loaded revolver which she knew well how to use.

She overheard the conversation between Kruger and the two guards, and at a motion of her hand, the giant negro was upon his feet, ready to do battle in her behalf. Unarmed as he was, few men would have cared to risk an encounter with the sable giant.

"I come as a friend, lady," hastily uttered Kruger, as he saw the negro, every muscle strained, crouching in readiness to leap upon

and tear him limb from limb at a single word from the lips of his fair mistress.

"Keep your distance and you are safe enough," cried Sibyl, sternly, all her native spirit returning now that actual peril threatened her. "You can be no friend of mine. I recognize your face. You were one of those who brought us here, captives, for death or extortion!"

"Yet still I am your friend, whether you are willing to acknowledge it or not," quietly returned Kruger. "You find me among rascals, but not of them. In one word I can assure you that I am here now to serve you—you and my friend Lancelot Daintree!"

A faint cry escaped Sibyl's lips at the utterance of that name—the name of one whom she had long mourned as dead. Kruger raised one hand in warning. Hercules glanced doubtfully from one to the other, his suspicions clearly awakened by that forbidden name.

Kruger saw that he had made a mistake, and hastened to correct it.

"How I learned it, does not matter now, but I know that you have seen my friend Dainty Lance since I have, and can tell me much concerning him. Please direct your black friend to act as guard here, so that we can converse without being overheard."

Sibyl obeyed, her brain sadly bewildered. The glad hope inspired by the first mention of Dainty Lance was crushed by the second, and yet there was something encouraging in the manner of this stranger.

Slowly and doubtfully Hercules obeyed. His suspicions once aroused were not easily allayed. Yet he dared not disobey Sibyl unless he had the orders of the Mad Hermit, his idolized foster-brother. He was paramount with the giant negro.

"I am sorry you forced me to utter my friend's name, lady," said Kruger softly, as he drew Sibyl away from the entrance as far as possible. "Lance told me the big fellow could not be trusted to act against his master—"

"Then you have seen him—he is alive?" gasped the maiden, almost suffocating with strong emotion.

"I saw him last about a month ago, but I have heard from him several times since. Be brave, lady!" he added, hurriedly, gently supporting the emotion-shaken girl with his arm. "Time is very precious now. If the dawn of another day finds you here, no earthly power can save you from a fate infinitely worse than death!"

There was an intense eagerness in his tones that plainly told he deemed the present emergency a truly critical one, and with an heroic effort Sibyl choked down her emotion. Yet so often of late had she been dealt treacherously with, that there was doubt mingled with the eagerness in her eyes as she gazed steadily into the face of this stranger who appeared to feel such a strong interest in her welfare.

"I see you still doubt me, lady," said Kruger, a slight trace of sorrow in his soft tones. "I do not complain—I would not even regret your prudence, were it not for the loss of precious time which a full explanation will entail."

"Such doubt is only common prudence, and if you are an honest man, you will not take offense," said the maiden, more coldly. "Remember what has passed. I saw you among those men who brought us here—self confessed thieves and outlaws. I heard the chief address you as one in whom he placed full confidence—so too the men whom you just now relieved from guarding me."

"Circumstances are against me, I admit," frankly responded Kruger, "but I trust there will be time for me to convince you that I am what I claim—an officer of justice, just at present engaged by and working for a good friend to us both—Lancelot Daintree."

"I saw him lying dead at my feet—"

"You saw him fainting from great loss of blood, there in the Plain Cree country. He was not dead. He recovered, and trailed you across the desert to the mines. He met me, and we renewed the old friendship. I am a detective by profession, out here in quest of a notorious criminal. Knowing this, Lance told me his whole story—how you were torn apart by your father just as the old priest was on the point of marrying you two—how he had sworn to find you or spend his entire life in the search—and I pledged myself to assist him as far as lay in my power."

"He had no clew when we separated. I joined this band, pretending to be as bad as the worst, because, sooner or later, I knew we would come in contact with the man I was hunting down. Ever since I have been on the look-

out for some trace of you, but only found it today. With more than a dozen armed men against me, I could do nothing by force—cunning alone could serve you."

"I saw—and so must you—that there was some strange bond between the captain and the man you call your father—"

Sibyl uttered an exclamation of wonder at this speech, but Kruger checked her with a meaning glance toward Hercules, who stood watching them suspiciously.

"Be more guarded—the negro is more the old man's friend than yours. I repeat—the man who calls himself your father. I eavesdropped him and the captain just before I came here, and learned that much. His whole life has been a lie—you are not his child—not a drop of his blood runs in your veins. Even if his own lips had not confessed as much, I would have suspected it, for surely no father would consent to so cruelly sacrifice his own daughter to a conscienceless rascal like the captain—"

"What do you mean?" gasped Sibyl, pressing her hands to her temples as though she was going distracted.

"I wish we had more time, so I could break this dreadful knowledge to you more gradually," replied Kruger, his tones full of strong sympathy for her evident suffering. "But there is not—you must escape from here to-night, or you are forever lost!"

"Tell me—I am strong—I can bear it now."

"This man, Wilbur Mason, is the step-son of him whom you have known as your father, whose real name is Howard Glenn. When you were a child, he stole you from your parents whom he hated. Your loss killed your mother, whom he, Glenn, loved after an insane fashion. Drink and baffled love drove him crazy—but never mind that. When we have escaped, I will tell you all. Enough for the present that he knows Dainty Lance is on his track—it was that knowledge that made him leave so suddenly—and he has pledged himself to give you to his step-son as his wife, provided Wilbur Mason will find and kill Lancelot Daintree."

Sibyl sunk down upon the cold floor, sobbing bitterly. Hercules, with an angry and threatening growl, strode toward Kruger, who might have fared badly, had not the maiden suddenly arisen, and motioned the negro back.

"I can hardly bring myself to believe the terrible words you have uttered," she said, only smothering her strong agitation by the utmost exercise of her will. "But there must be some truth in it, else why did my—did he show such dreadful agitation when that man called him Howard Glenn?"

"I swear that I have told you nothing but the truth," said Kruger, earnestly. "Trust in me, and I will take you away from here—will place you in the arms of Dainty Lance before another sun sets. But whatever is done must be done quickly or not at all. At any moment the captain and your pretended father may come here, and if they discover or even suspect the double part I have been playing, you will lose your last hope of avoiding a doom horrible to contemplate."

"You forget him," whispered Sibyl, with a glance in the direction of suspicious Hercules, whose eyes never left them for a moment. "Dear as he loves me, he would never desert my—his master; nor would he suffer me to go without him."

"He must be silenced, then!" muttered Kruger.

"No—not that—I would abandon all hope of escape rather than see him injured, much less killed!" cried Sibyl.

Kruger shrugged his shoulders with a little laugh.

"You mistake me, lady. A pistol shot would alarm the whole gang, and though I don't think I am much of a coward, I confess I wouldn't care to tackle the man-mountain with only a knife. Even were he to stand quietly to receive the blow, it would take a regulation saber to reach his heart!"

"No, by 'silenced,' I meant drugged. Luckily I have the means about me—a flask of whisky and opium enough to put him to sleep for a few hours. If you can only induce him to take it—do you think you can?"

"Are you sure—?" and Sibyl looked into his eyes keenly.

"On my honor there is not enough to harm him," said Kruger, answering her unspoken thought. "It will only make him sleep for a few hours. But will he take it?"

"From my hand, yes. He is passionately fond of liquor, like nearly all of his race, but were it pure gall instead and I bade him drink, Hercules would drain the cup to the last drop.

It is only when my wishes clash with—with his, that Hercules goes against me."

"Careful then—don't let him see you take it from my hands. Put in the opium and induce him to empty the bottle as soon as possible. He will feel the effects of the drug almost immediately. As soon as he sleeps, come to the entrance yonder and cough twice, not too loud. Be sure I will hear you, and come at once."

Sibyl concealed the flask and drug in a fold of her dress, then Kruger bade her good night in a tone loud enough for Hercules to hear, adding:

"I will give him your answer, lady. Rest as easy as you can. No one shall disturb you again to-night."

Brushing past the giant negro, who looked as though he would dearly like to grasp and crush him in his mighty arms, Kruger returned to the outer chamber, where he found the outlaws employed much as when he had passed through on his way to the stone cell.

The two guards looked up as he passed by them, as if expecting to be sent back to their posts, but as the lieutenant said nothing, they did the same, content to let well enough alone.

Kruger passed outside, and glanced toward the cabin; the red rays still streamed through the cracks in the door, as though the two conspirators were yet engaged in conversation, but he made no move in that direction.

He had heard quite enough for his purpose.

For several minutes he remained gazing listlessly around him, but then came a sudden change over the beautiful stillness of the moonlight night.

He heard a crashing sound come from the direction of the cabin, and as his eyes turned thither, he saw a sudden light stream upward, as though a portion of the roof had been removed, followed by loud cries of astonishment and alarm. A moment's silence followed, then came the loud voice of Captain Mason, sounding the alarm.

Swift as thought, Kruger leaped into the bushes, just as the road-agents began rushing forth from the cavern.

The angry voice of Mason still came from the cabin, and the outlaws flocked toward that spot.

As they did so, Kruger entered the cave, greatly excited.

"It's now or never!" he muttered, whipping forth a revolver. "If the nigger is not asleep yet, so much the worse for him! I'll not be foiled at this stage of the game—"

He said no more, for at that moment he heard two coughs, the signal agreed upon with Sibyl that Hercules slept! —

CHAPTER VI.

AN ATROCIOUS CRIME.

CRASH through the rotten roof and down into the little room plunged the unlucky spy, striking upon one corner of the rude table, then toppling over upon the floor, bewildered and confused, half-stunned by the shock and surprise.

In amazement the two conspirators stared at the human apparition, but the wits of men who carry their lives in their hands are active, and as the fallen spy began to struggle, Wilbur Mason darted around the table and flung himself upon him.

"Lend a hand, old man!" he snarled, as, partially recovered from his paralyzing contact with the table, the spy began to struggle desperately to throw off his assailant. "The devil has heard all; if he escapes, we are both ruined!"

Until this appeal the Mad Hermit had stood like one suddenly transformed into stone, but as he realized the peril threatening them, he hastened to the assistance of his step-son. His hands were still bound behind him, but watching his chance, he threw his weight upon the lower limbs of the spy, thus hampering his movements so effectually that Mason freed one arm and then dashed his tight-clinched fist against the temple of the spy, with all the force at his command.

No need for that blow to be repeated. With a faint groan the limbs of the spy relaxed, and he lay like one dead as Wilbur Mason sprang to his feet, crying:

"Outside and look around—there may be more of the daring devils around!" and he sounded the signal cry that told his men their aid was needed, bringing them on a run from the cavern, weapons drawn and ready.

"Scatter and hunt close!" he shouted, leaping across the threshold and glaring fiercely around. "Kill or capture any one you find afoot, unless they sing the note of the family—lively, ye devils!"

Actively the outlaws scattered, eager to find

a victim on whom to flesh their weapons, and Mason would have joined them, only for a curious sound from within the cabin.

Remembering that the audacious spy was unbound, while Howard Glenn's arms were pinned behind him, the outlaw chief hastily reentered the cabin.

He saw Howard Glenn, pale as a ghost, with half-averted face and trembling frame, staring at the upturned face of the young spy, who was just beginning to recover his senses. He roughly grasped the Mad Hermit by the shoulder, shaking him contemptuously, as he cried:

"What are you afraid of, old man?"

Even as he uttered these words his eyes followed the direction of the hermit's gaze, and an oath escaped him.

"Harry Ballou, by the Eternal!"

"Lancelot Daintree—come back to haunt me!"

Simultaneously the two names were uttered, and with such deep emphasis that the amazement of each was counteracted by that of the other.

"The fellow will escape us while we are wondering," exclaimed Wilbur Mason, his keen eye detecting the hand of the half-conscious spy groping at his belt for a weapon. "Fetch yonder rope," he added, freeing the Mad Hermit's arms with a single slash of his keen knife, and nodding toward the further corner of the room.

Stooping, he unbuckled the belt of the spy, threatening him with his long knife to insure quiescence. Then unceremoniously rolling him over upon his face, he bound him hand and foot with the lasso produced by Glenn.

"Now we'll see who and what he is," chuckled the outlaw, grimly, dragging his captive over the floor and propping him against the wall in a sitting posture. "Bring the light, old man. Curse it! have you got the ague?" he snarled, angrily, as a few drops of burning grease fell upon his hands from the lamp that trembled violently in the grasp of the Mad Hermit.

"It is he—Lancelot Daintree!" huskily whispered the hermit, powerfully agitated. "Twice have I gazed upon him dead—this is the third time, and now 'twill be my turn!"

Wilbur Mason laughed mockingly, contemptuously.

"Bah! your brain is softening, old man, and you see specters where there is solid flesh and blood. You mistake one for the other—this fellow is Harry Ballou!"

"A lie!" cried the hermit, fiercely, his deep-set eyes aglow. "Do you think I can ever forget him—his face so like that of Pierce Ballou when I called him my dearest friend? Millions of curses forever rest on his head!"

Despite the fact of his being armed to the teeth, while the Mad Hermit had naught save his naked hands, Wilbur Mason shrunk from before that burning gaze.

"Never mind; you may be right and I wrong. Anyhow, there is no need of our pulling hair over it, when the matter can so easily be settled by asking him his name."

During this strange altercation the young spy had quite recovered his senses, and now had all his wits about him. He remembered all that he had heard from his place of espial, and from that shaped his conduct.

"Who are you, anyhow?" roughly demanded Mason, touching him with the toe of his boot. "What is your name—Harry Ballou, of Clayton, Missouri, or Lancelot Daintree, from the devil knows where?"

"Take your choice; I'm not particular," was the cool response, the young fellow meeting the angry stare with provoking nonchalance.

"You are Dainty Lance—twice have I slain you—twice have I seen you dead—yet still you live!" said the hermit, hoarsely, touching the young man's face with the tip of his finger, then starting back with a convulsive shudder, as though he had touched a corpse.

"Very well," was the easy response. "Dainty Lance I am, if you prefer that name. Anything to please the children!"

"You lie, curse you!" cried Mason, in a rage.

"You are Harry Ballou, son of Pierce Ballou!" "Now come; what's the use in getting up on your ear about such a trifling matter?" placidly uttered the prisoner. "Don't I say that I am perfectly willing to satisfy you both? When he speaks, I am Dainty Lance. When you address me, I am Harry Ballou. Can mortal politeness go any further?"

Despite his anger, Wilbur Mason burst into a hearty laugh, and the eyes of the captive brightened, for he believed his object was at least partly gained. But the next words of the outlaw chief quickly undeceived him.

"After all, as you say, what matter? Be you Dainty Lance or Harry Ballou, you are worth more to us dead than alive!"

"You cannot kill him—the fates have said it!" muttered the Mad Hermit gloomily, sinking upon a stool beside the table. "He is the avenger—I see the face of his murdered mother floating before him—and I feel her icy finger touching my heart! It is spoken! He will live and we shall die—die the death of dogs by his hand!"

"Prophecy for yourself, old fool—I'll none of it!" sneered Mason, yet with a strange, chilling spasm at his own heart despite his bravado.

"You never knew a more accommodating fellow than I am," said the prisoner, easily. "If it is my name—or either of them—that you object to, I am ready to don another. As the bard says, what's in a name? You can blow your nose just as easily if you call it a trombone or blacksmith bellows—"

"Enough of this nonsense," cried Mason, sternly. "Playing the buffoon will not save your hide, young fellow. Be you Dainty Lance, Harry Ballou or the devil, you have heard too much to live long."

"Bet you a hatful of dust that I live to see you pull hemp, anyhow!" recklessly cried the prisoner.

"Possibly; but if so, you will beat the wrong end of the rope," sneered the road-agent. "Yet there may be a chance for your life, if you are sensible," he added, his tone changing. "You did not come here alone. Who and where are your allies?"

A mocking laugh was the only response. The pretense was too shallow. The spy knew that his death was resolved upon, and though a cold chill crept around his heart as he thought of the one fair woman whose life was bound up in his, naught save scornful defiance was suffered to come into his face or voice.

"Count your men when they come back, sir robber—then go and repeat your question to the dead curs that will never again bay honest travelers. But keep a wary look-out, or you may chance to meet men—and then there will be an election for a fresh leader in your gang of cut-throats!"

What answer Wilbur Mason might have made to this bitter taunt, can only be surmised, for at that juncture, there came the sound of tramping feet without, and the outlaw chief sprang to the door just as his men came up, empty handed, as a single glance told him.

"We never see'd hide n'r ha'r of nobody, cap'n," said old Rubber, acting as spokesman for his mates. "Thar couldn't 'a' bin nobody else around, or the moonlight would 'a' showed 'em to us, sure."

Wilbur Mason saw this much for himself. The full moon flooded the hill and valley with a silvery light, clear almost as the noonday sun, rendering surrounding objects distinctly visible, and his heart grew lighter as he believed the spy within had been alone.

"Very well; if you are satisfied, I am, since you risk quite as much by the escape of a spy as myself. I fortunately captured one—it may be he was alone."

Briefly he detailed the manner in which the prisoner had fallen into his hands, adding:

"He keeps a close tongue between his teeth, but I believe he is a sort of amateur detective, sent here to spy out our secrets. He must have followed us from where we took the wagon, and if so, he has ferreted out the secret of the den."

"Better you had given him the knife, 'stead o' takin' him pris'n'r," growled old Rubber, and the ferocious murmur which followed his sanguinary speech told plainly that he had uttered the sentiments of his mates as well.

"If I made a mistake, it is one easily rectified," responded the outlaw chief, with a cruel laugh. "The fellow is in yonder, a prisoner. He knows what we are—where our snug retreat is—and if set free, no doubt would hasten back as guide to Morgan's Rough-riders, who would almost as soon clean us out as to pick up Joaquin."

"He mustn't go free—that's flat!" growled Rubber.

"Just as the majority decides," laughed Mason. "My voice is that only of one man, and no louder than any one of yours. Give your decision—life or death?"

"Death!" uttered every man in deep chorus.

The word smote upon the ears of the captive within, but the only evidence he gave of hearing it was in a gray shade that settled over his face. Otherwise not a muscle moved. A bold, brave heart was his, and he resolved to meet

his doom without giving his merciless foes the grim pleasure of seeing his fears, or of brutally refusing his prayers for mercy.

"You have said it!" cried the outlaw chief, his eyes aglow with a ferocious joy. "But how shall he die?"

"Hang him—cut his throat—shoot him!" were among the sanguinary cries that arose upon the night air.

Again Wilbur Mason laughed, with cold malignance.

"Bah! that would be murder, seeing the fellow is bound and helpless. Besides, it is coarse and brutish—"

"It's his life or curn!" growled Rubber. "He's got to die, and what differ' does it make how he goes under?"

"Not much to him when all is ended, I dare say, but there is a genteel method of doing these things. Shedding blood deliberately is barbarous and far behind the age. Besides, when one has eaten a hearty supper, such things are apt to trouble his dreams."

"I move we let the boss name the way o' polishin' the cove off," cried Keeble.

"Jest so the work is done clean, I don't keer," muttered Rubber, who appeared to be a chronic grumbler.

"I'll risk my reputation on it; even you shall be satisfied, old find-fault," laughed Mason. "Some of you bring the fellow out. Take him to the leaning cedar over yonder."

The prisoner was lifted from the floor and borne along the shelf for several hundred yards to a point where a cedar tree, nearly a foot in diameter, grew almost horizontally out over the dizzy abyss.

At this point the descent was almost perpendicular for fully two hundred feet. At the base of the cliff lay huge rocks and boulders which had from time to time fallen there from the hill, loosened by the action of the elements.

Mason soon came up, bearing a stout raw-hide lasso. Smiling cruelly, he stepped lightly along the tree trunk, reaching the boughs where he crouched down and tied one end of the rope firmly to the tree, then flung the noose end back to the cliff top.

A murmur of disappointment came from the bloodthirsty ruffians at this, for from his words they had anticipated something more novel than a simple hanging.

Mason smiled mockingly as he retraced his steps and read aright their thoughts.

"Have patience, my pets; don't jump at conclusions," was all he vouchsafed in reply, as he bent over the prostrate form of the doomed spy, slipping the noose of the lasso over his feet and then taking several turns of the rope around his ankles.

"Scatter now and collect fuel enough to make a good fire," he cried, as the rope was adjusted to his satisfaction.

His order was promptly obeyed, and while his ruffians were thus occupied, Mason addressed his prisoner.

"It is not yet too late, young fellow. Tell me who and what you are. The old man swears you are Lancelot Daintree—I am quite as positive you are Harry Ballou. Which is right?"

Not a sound came from the tightly closed lips of the spy. He knew that this was a false hope held out to him, and as the only possible revenge, he would die with his lips shut, leaving his enemy in doubt to the last.

"Better speak!" hurriedly muttered Mason, his eyes glowing viciously. "It will be a horrible doom—you will see death stealing upon you. Quick! your name—too late now!"

The outlaws returned bearing armfuls of dry fuel which they cast down at the root of the cedar tree.

Wilbur Mason arose, his face that of a veritable fiend.

"Start a fire, somebody, and pile the wood upon the trunk of the tree. We are honest men, who would scorn to imbrue our hands in human blood. We will not even put an enemy out of the way by hanging—for that reason I fasten the noose around his ankles. If the rope breaks, or the fire eats through the trunk of the tree before the stubborn fool makes confession, who can blame us or lay his death at our door?"

A ferocious cheer burst from the lips of the ruffianly crew as they divined the diabolical torture devised by their chief. Truly this was more amusing than simple hanging, shooting or stabbing!

The helpless youth was dragged to the edge of the cliff and pushed over. The tree-top shook and quivered beneath the shock, while the crackling fire at its base burned up brighter than ever!

CHAPTER VII.

FROM BAD TO WORSE.

NEVER more welcome sounds ever came to mortal ear than that little cough twice repeated as Frank Kruger was hastening along the narrow passage, his pistol drawn in readiness to silence the giant negro had all else failed.

"Thank Heaven you have succeeded!" he exclaimed, as he entered the stone cell and beheld Hercules lying in one corner, breathing heavily from the effects of the powerfully drugged liquor. "Come! a single moment lost now may mean your ruin and my death!"

For the first time Sibyl felt a doubt that all was not right. Perhaps it was the burning fire that flashed in the black eyes of Kruger. Be that as it may, she wondered why this stranger should risk his own life on the frail chance of rescuing her from peril—one whom he had never laid eyes on before that day.

"Because you are the friend of my friend," he breathed, hurriedly, seemingly with the power to read her inmost thoughts. "Because you are doomed to a fate worse than words can tell unless you escape from here, and that right speedily. If you falter now, you are lost forever!"

With intense earnestness he spoke, his hand closing upon the maiden's arm as though he would force her to bear him company in his flight; but this exercise of power was not needed. That allusion to Dainty Lance—to the loved one for whose ill-timed death her eyes had daily shed bitter tears of heart-breaking grief—conquered her doubts, if doubts such vague, shadowy thoughts could be called, and she yielded to the friend, true or false, that Providence seemed to have raised up for her.

"Thanks!" murmured Kruger, softly. "You shall never have cause to regret the trust you are placing in me."

"Lead on—delay may be dangerous," murmured Sibyl, casting one lingering glance at the recumbent form of the giant negro, then turning to the detective.

Kruger blew out the dim light, then grasped her hand.

"That will delay them a few moments, if they should come here too soon," he said, with a short, reckless laugh. "Now, lady, be bold. I well know the way, and can follow it in the dark. Trust all to me. I will rescue you from these human wolves, or they shall drink the last drop of my heart's blood!"

In silence Sibyl followed him through the intense darkness, for the course he took was not that leading back to the large cavern. Instead, he proceeded only a few yards in that direction, then facing to the left, raised the maiden in his arms above his head, resting her feet upon a ledge of rock.

"Careful, lady!" he cautioned. "Steady yourself by the point of rock close to your left hand—so!"

As he spoke he sprang nimbly up beside her, and once more clasping her wrist with his hot, burning fingers, pressed on through the intense, almost palpable darkness, as readily as though the way had been illumined by the full power of the noonday sun.

Thus they proceeded for, what seemed to the overwrought senses of Sibyl, an immense distance before Kruger again came to a halt.

"We are only a few steps now from the outer world, lady," he said, his lips bending close to her ear as he breathed the words guardedly. "It is barely possible that there may be a guard placed at the entrance, though that is not customary. You will not be afraid to wait here alone for a few moments?"

"No; but avoid bloodshed if possible."

"I have sworn to set you at liberty, lady—to place you in the arms of one who loves you passionately—and I will keep that oath though I have to pass over the bodies of a dozen men!"

There was an intensity in his tones that almost frightened Sibyl, and once more those vague doubts came back to torture her. After all, what proof had she that this stranger would not prove an even worse enemy than those from whom he was aiding her to flee? All she knew of him was what he had chosen to tell her. Might it not all be lies, cunningly shaped, to the more surely get her into his power?

Mechanically her hand sought her weapons, and as her fingers closed upon the polished butt of her faithful revolver, Sibyl felt that, in a measure, she carried her future in her own hand. And at this came a revulsion. She realized the full extent of her injustice to the man who was gallantly risking his life for the sake of freeing her from the power of unscrupulous enemies.

It was a sin to doubt his motives.

At this juncture Frank Kruger returned, to receive a far more cordial hand clasp than would have been his had he come one minute earlier.

"The coast is clear, I am happy to say," he whispered, while his fingers returned the pressure of the little hand. "But I must warn you to be prudent, and not allow your surprise to break forth in words above a whisper. You can be brave—you can see, and yet not cry aloud?"

Wondering at the poorly-concealed anxiety in his tones, since he declared the coast was clear for their flight, Sibyl declared that her feelings were under good control.

"I sincerely trust so," responded Kruger. "Bear in mind that if discovered now, those ruffians would look on me as a traitor, and should I fall into their power alive, a terrible doom would be mine. By this, don't take me to be a coward, for such I am not. Only I alone now stand between you and a life of wretched misery as the enforced wife of that ruffian rascal, Wilbur Mason. I will not desert you, come what may."

"You can trust me," repeated Sibyl, more than ever mystified by his rapid, almost incoherent speech.

"Come, then," he added, briefly, drawing her after him.

In a few moments they reached a screen of vine-clad bushes, much the same as that which concealed the main entrance to the cave. Parting this, Kruger bade Sibyl look forth, and she obeyed.

Despite the warning she had received, a low cry of wonder burst from the maiden's lips, checked midway by the detective slipping his palm over her mouth.

"Remember!" he muttered, warningly. "The distance is not so great but that a single word may draw the bloodhounds upon us."

"My father—he is there, and at liberty!" gasped Sibyl, freeing her lips, and gazing almost fearfully into the dark face of her companion. "You are deceiving me!"

"Pray tell me how, lady," softly returned Kruger, a cold smile curling his lip as he stood with arms folded across his broad chest. "Look again, and tell me what you see!"

Mechanically Sibyl turned her gaze as directed.

Not far away, and only a few yards below their present level, was spread a wild, peculiar scene.

A group of ruffianly-looking men were gathered in a half-circle before a glowing fire. Among these men Sibyl recognized the Mad Hermit by his long beard and floating hair, the snowy white now given a ghastly blood-tinge by the red flames. She also distinguished the outlaw chief—and at his feet lay a bound form, the figure of a man, but whether living or dead, she could only surmise.

Even as she gazed, she saw the outlaw leader cruelly spurn the helpless form over the edge of the cliff with his foot, and heard the loud, devilish laughter which greeted the inhuman action.

"From that you can judge the nature of the bridegroom selected for you, lady," said Kruger, in a cold, hard tone. "Yonder poor wretch was alive, a harmless miner whom those devils in human shape captured as he was innocently prospecting for gold. They chose to consider him a spy upon them, and you see the result."

Sibyl shuddered with horror, and covered her eyes.

"And there stands the man you have been taught to call father, a quiet spectator, who did not deem it worth his while to utter even one word on behalf of the poor doomed wretch—"

"Enough—take me away," gasped Sibyl, trembling like a leaf tossed by the storm.

"I dare not until you have recovered your self-control. We must creep over fifty yards in full view of those rascals, should any of them chance to be looking this way. A single false step would be fatal. Compose yourself—"

"I am—see!" and Sibyl held out her hand.

Exerting the full force of her remarkable will, she steadied her nerves at once. Kruger saw this, and in a hurried whisper bade her follow him closely and carefully imitate his actions.

Crouching low down, he glided along the narrow shelf like some bodiless phantom of the night. Close behind him pressed Sibyl, displaying an equal degree of skill and caution. And one minute later they arose, the fire concealed from view.

"So far, nothing could be better," exclaimed Kruger, laughing shortly. "A glorious begin-

ing—if we can only keep on as well. There is a hard night's work before us, lady, I am sorry to say, for your sake. It cannot be long before our flight is discovered, and then those human bloodhounds will be on our trail hot-foot!"

"I place my dependence wholly on you, sir," responded the maiden. "Whatever you think best, I agree to without demur. Only—we are losing precious time by lingering here."

"I was only hesitating in doubt as to whether you could endure the toil and fatigue—"

"I have wandered through worse hills than these, from dawn until dark without thinking of fatigue, simply for pleasure. Surely I can do the same and more to escape the terrible doom you pictured."

"Good!" exclaimed Kruger, his eyes kindling. "I see my friend Lance did not exaggerate when he said—"

"You know where he is? You will take me to him?" interposed the maiden, her voice trembling with strong emotion, her eyes filling with a rare love-light.

"Yes, you shall see him to-morrow, provided Mason and his rascals do not overtake us before."

"Then let us be moving; time is very precious now!"

In silence Frank Kruger turned and led the way through the thick-lying rocks, Sibyl keeping close up with nimble steps, more than once as the hours passed by, urging him on to renewed speed. In wonder Kruger regarded her, that such a frail form should contain such powers.

Little marvel. Was she not fleeing from a doom more cruel and repulsive than death? Was she not hastening to meet her lover—her almost husband?

On through the night they fled, lighted by the round moon, twisting and turning as unpassable barriers reared themselves before them, until, versed as she was in mountain lore, Sibyl lost all knowledge of their whereabouts or the direction in which lay the outlaws' retreat. But Kruger led the way like one perfectly familiar with every rod of their surroundings, and the growing joy in her heart would not let her doubt even for a moment.

It was Kruger who first proposed a halt for the remainder of the night, declaring that he was too wearied to go further.

"How you have borne up is a marvel to me, lady; you look so frail and delicate!" he declared in a tone that sounded half provoked.

"You forget my mountain life and training," she responded with a low laugh. "I could keep on for hours, yet, if necessary. But you know best, and I submit to your judgment."

"We are twenty miles from the cave, and safe enough from those rascals. We can reach the place where I agreed to meet Lance by noon to-morrow, so there is no need of haste now. He'll not be there before nightfall."

A brief search resulted in finding a sheltered spot where a small fire could be kindled without fear of its light betraying their presence, should any enemy chance to be near, and in a few minutes Sibyl was reclining on a soft couch of pine and cedar twigs, while Kruger squatted on the opposite side of the fire, smoking his pipe in lazy comfort.

Sibyl would have preferred hearing more about Dainty Lance, but Kruger told her talking would be dangerous.

"In the night time, among these rocks, the sound of the human voice travels far, and though I have no particular fear that any of those rascals have trailed us this far, it is barely possible that some of them may chance along. Better lie down and sleep. There is hard traveling ahead of us yet, lady."

Sibyl recognized the wisdom of this advice, and was soon lost in slumber, not awaking until the day had fairly dawned.

The small fire was still burning, and beyond it sat Frank Kruger, just as though he had not altered his position through the night. Sibyl was about to reproach him with being too solicitous for her welfare, when she encountered his gaze, burning, filled with a strange fire.

She now noticed a great change in him. His face was haggard and deeply lined. There was an evil smile on his lips, and his eyes were blood-shot. An empty flask lay beside him. He had been drinking—was half drunk now!

Instinctively her hand sought her weapons, but they were gone! And a cold chill of terror seized her heart as the man whom until now she had believed her true friend, said:

"I removed those playthings while you slept, my dear, for fear you would hurt yourself," and as he spoke he touched the weapons, now in his belt. "Come, give me a good-morning kiss, pet, and say you forgive me for fooling you!"

CHAPTER VIII.

HARDY ZEPH ON DECK.

"A TWO-MULE team, driv' by a nigger—an' sech a nigger! That's what they said. An' so I reckon I've struck the right trail at last. Fer I don't b'lieve this yer world is big enough to hold two sech niggers. One on 'em is enough, but two'd be a heap more'n plenty!"

These sentences were disjointed, being uttered with a less or greater pause after each one as the speaker cast a searching glance around and before him, or else bent low in the saddle to read the faint sign on the stony trail he was following.

A short, massive-built frame, broad shoulders and long, muscular arms; a weather-beaten face on which was just sprouting the fuzzy down that marks the intermediate stage separating the boy from the man. Robed from head to foot in soft-smoked buckskin, daintily embroidered with beads and split quills, brightly stained, while here and there were flowers and vines wrought by a cunning and patient hand in silk floss. Even his head covering was made of the same pliable material, and fitting over his long locks like a second scalp. There was no visor. Those keen gray eyes needed no protection against the noonday sun.

Such was Zephaniah Hardy, "Hardy Zeph" to those who knew him best, tough and rugged as a pine knot, but carrying in his broad bosom a heart of gold that never yet failed friend or quailed before a mortal foe. Very different in outward appearance from when he last figured before the reader of the LIBRARY, thanks to Netawaka, the Wolf Queen, who pressed this magnificent suit upon him as a token of sisterly regard when she found herself unable to bestow upon him what alone she coveted—herself. It was her hands that finished those silken vines and flowers, and Hardy Zeph, in his rude, simple fashion fairly worshiped the delicate fabrications, and perhaps whispered to them his prayers when he lay down to sleep—who knows?

The trail he was following was that made less than two hours before by the train which contained the Mad Hermit, Sibyl and Hercules.

He and Dainty Lance, after many adventures, privations and narrow escapes from death by the way, had reached California, and at once began their search for the lost maiden whom Lance regarded as his wife.

Thinly settled as the country was at that date, it was not long before they heard news of the fugitives. Two such peculiar characters as the Mad Hermit and the giant negro could not long escape particular notice, and once seen were not likely to be forgotten. But still more frequent were the allusions to the marvelously beautiful lady who bore them company. The fair sex were still a rarity in the land of gold. Even a squat, dirty, greasy, wrinkled Indian squaw was capable of attracting lingering gazes from the hardy miners, simply because she was a woman. Imagine, then, the interest excited wherever dainty Sibyl passed! For a friendly smile or a kind word from her lips, many a big-hearted fellow would have plunged through fire and water and then deemed himself amply repaid.

The reader may think this an exaggeration, but I affirm that it is not. My father and two uncles were among the first who flocked to the land of gold in the year '49. For nearly two years the face of a white woman had not been seen in that section of the country, but then a man came in from one of the lower camps, bringing wonderful tidings. A fresh arrival there had brought his wife with him—and a baby had been born unto them in camp.

This news was delivered at sunset. By sunrise that mining-camp was deserted—and nearly two hundred miners were tramping to the lower camp, fifty odd miles away, leaving their claims, their tents and huts, their mining-tools all behind them—for what?

To once more gaze upon the face of a white woman and her little babe.

The happy husband and father came from Missouri, but doubtless there was Yankee blood in his veins, for when he realized the truth, he charged one dollar admission to his tent where mother and babe sat in state. The first was tall, gaunt, red-haired and freckled; the last red-faced and afflicted with a perpetual colic, judging from the manner in which it cried from morn till night, but in less than a month that speculative Pike was the richest man in camp.

My father was one of those who made that pilgrimage of over a hundred miles there and back, and though he had been married a dozen

years, was the father of five children, he has often declared that he felt amply repaid for all by that glimpse of "home and civilization." But he as often ended by declaring that that red-faced, pug-nosed, squalling youngster was the perfect image of the baby boy whom he left at home in his crib—in other words, he who writes these lines.

A long and may be tedious digression, but the memory of those days as they really were, is growing daily more indistinct, and each authentic fact is worthy of being placed on record.

Though it was easy to hear of the fugitives, fate seemed to frown upon the boy trailers, and a month passed before they fairly struck the trail. Only to quickly lose it again, and then they separated, arranging a rendezvous, to increase their chances of finding those they sought.

Early that morning, the same day with which this story opens, Hardy Zeph recovered the lost trail. Some prospectors had met the wagon, and from their description of the three inmates, the young scout knew there could be no mistake. Steadily he had followed the trail, gradually gaining upon the fugitives, until now he was momentarily expecting to come upon their camp, for the shades of evening were settling rapidly over the valley through which the trail wound.

Suddenly he drew rein as he reached a curve in the narrow valley, his eyes fixed upon a column of dark smoke that rose high into the air.

"They's a fire under that smoke, but it don't look right! Hes the old man an' the nigger both gone crazy that they raise sech a almighty signboard to tell everybody whar they hang out?"

With his suspicions fully aroused, Hardy Zeph dismounted and concealed his sturdy little mustang among a clump of bushes and high rocks, then looking to the caps on his rifle and revolvers, stole cautiously toward the smoke.

A few minutes sufficed to carry him within full view, and then his suspicions were confirmed. The smoke arose from the ruins of the wagon and its contents, fired by the order of the road-agent chief as already detailed.

A true born scout, Hardy Zeph completely circled the spot, keeping carefully under cover until he was assured that no living being save himself was lurking in the vicinity. Then he arose, and standing close to the fire, stared fixedly into the glowing mass as though striving to read the mystery.

"Thar's the tires an' the other iron-work—a wagon, sure enough, an' boun' to be the same one I've been follerin'," he muttered, barely above his breath. "Ef so, an' it was them, whar is the little lady-bird?"

Turning aside and bending low, Hardy Zeph read the "sign" thick scattered about. He saw the little pool of blood that marked the spot where the giant negro had fallen, and the frown deepened on his brow.

"They's been deviltry a-doin', though that blood ain't enough to dreen the veins of a baby in arms. A wheen o' men hev trampled the ground, but yer goes the mule tracks, side by side, at a walk. They went fast, so they must 'a' bin rid by some one. The men followed after. I can't make out the track o' Lady-bird anywhar—but I reckon she ain't hurt. Devils fresh from hell couldn't find the heart to hurt such an angel as she is!"

Hardy Zeph felt sure that those whom he sought had encountered a band of road-agents, and his resolution was quickly taken. He would follow the trail to the end, and if the betrothed of his heart-brother was in peril, he would rescue her, or die in the attempt.

Returning to where he had left his horse, he set the well-trained animal free, bidding it follow him. Then, with the knowing mustang at his heels he once more passed the fire and followed the trail over the stony ground as rapidly as the increasing gloom would permit.

"The trail is fresh, an' they cain't hev traveled much funder, I don't think," he muttered, turning into the side pass and gliding on, keeping a wary look-out ahead.

But the gloom in the valley grew deeper, and ere long he found it impossible to distinguish the trail, the soil was so stony and barren of aught to retain footprints.

For a while longer he kept on, but then paused as he came to a point where there was a choice of half-a-dozen trails. In vain he sought for something to show him which one of these had been taken by the road-agents.

"It's p'izen luck!" he muttered, in disgust, as he abandoned the effort. "They may be almost

within reach o' my hand, yit I've got to lose the hull night—and mebbe the only chaine of gittin' the lady-bird free—durn it all!"

The thought was a bitter one, and Hardy Zeph felt sour and gloomy enough as he opened his saddle-bags and began to munch some hard dried meat.

The mustang found a spot where grew some palatable bushes and scanty grass whereupon he fell to work much better satisfied with the situation than was his master.

Exercising his jaws also seemed to sharpen Hardy Zeph's wits, for an idea struck him which he at once set about carrying out.

He knew that it must have been nearly dark when the party passed this point. Surely they would not journey much further before going into camp? And in hopes of catching sight of their camp-fire, he resolved to explore each one of the trails for a certain distance, leaving his horse tethered at the point from which they diverged to guard against his losing his reckoning.

Two of the openings he explored, only to find them each ending in no "thoroughfare," but at the third attempt he hit upon the right one, starting along it at the precise moment that the young spy was precipitated through the rotten roof into the hands of those he was eaves-dropping.

The moon was shining brightly now, but its beams had not yet reached the bottom of the valley, and Hardy Zeph was forced to grope his way through the shadows. Much time had been consumed in his former explorations, but the boy trailer felt amply repaid for all the pains he had taken when he saw, at no great distance in advance, a red glow that was momentarily growing larger.

This star-like point of light was high above the level of the valley, seemingly suspended in mid-air, but as Hardy Zeph glided on, he saw that it was kindled on the edge of a high cliff. He could distinguish a number of human forms—and then an involuntary exclamation of horror parted his lips.

That fire was the one kindled by order of Wilbur Mason, and Hardy Zeph beheld the bound form of the young spy hurled over the dizzy depths by the brutal outlaw—saw the body checked by the lasso around its feet, and, then swing helplessly to and fro, head downward, greeted by the devilish laughter and coarse jeers of those fiends in human shape as they eagerly peered down upon their doomed victim.

Instinctively the boy trailer's rifle was flung forward, the double sights bearing full upon the broad breast of Wilbur Mason, who never stood nearer death's door than at that moment. But then, though his finger fairly itched to press the trigger, Hardy Zeph lowered his rifle undischarged.

"I'd do it ef I wasn't on duty," he muttered, hoarsely, wiping away the cold sweat that had sprung out upon his forehead at the horrible sight. "But one shot an' one man cain't save that poor devil. I'd only set 'em hot-foot after me, an' then who'd look out fer the little lady-bird? Ef Dainty Lance only knowed—"

He ceased speaking as a truly horrible thought struck him. It was possible that Dainty Lance did know—that he also had struck the trail—and that yonder helpless wretch, dead or alive, hanging to the tree whose trunk was slowly but surely being eaten away by the flames, was none other than his heart-brother!

It was a fearful thought, somewhat far-fetched and with but little probability of being founded on fact, but it came to Hardy Zeph like a revelation. From that moment he firmly believed the swaying figure which he saw outlined against those red flames was indeed his chum, Lancelot Daintree.

"I'll save him, or we'll die together!" came gratefully through the lad's tight clinched teeth, as he glared around him in search of a path by which he might reach the level above.

He had formed no plan. His brain was confused and capable of shaping but one thought just then; that he must rescue his friend or die with him.

He ran hastily down the valley to where the ascent seemed less abrupt, and almost came in contact with his mustang which had leisurely followed him, until now unsuspected.

Instantly Hardy Zeph became cool and collected, and snatching the lasso from the pomel of his saddle, he slung it over his shoulder and began clambering up the steep hillside, in a few moments striking the winding trail used by the road-agents.

Reaching the level, he ran along it, keeping as well covered as possible without sacrificing speed. His only idea was to get within short

range of the outlaws, so that every shot would tell its tale, then open fire, hoping an unexpected attack of such desperate nature would cow the enemy and drive them to cover long enough for him to rescue the hanging man. It was a desperate scheme, with the chances all against success, and one that could never have been entertained save by one utterly ignorant of the meaning of personal fear.

As Hardy Zeph drew near the point where lay the hidden entrance to the cavern, he saw a tall figure burst through the leafy screen, and run with great bounds toward the fire, shouting loudly in agonized tones. Instinctively he crouched down under cover, believing he had been discovered, for he at once recognized the man. Few who had ever seen the Mad Hermit could have mistaken him for another—for that flying figure was that of Howard Glenn.

As no other form followed, Hardy Zeph arose, and ran swiftly toward the lone cabin. If he had been discovered, the enemy would naturally look for him near the spot where he had been when the Mad Hermit emerged from cover, and by this move he hoped to place himself between them and their hanging victim.

The dense shadows behind the cabin were reached, not a moment too soon, for back came the enemy, Howard Glenn and Wilbur Mason in the lead, both terribly excited.

"How could she get away? The nigger is there yet, you say?" Hardy Zeph heard the outlaw chief demand as they rushed past the cabin.

He heard the Mad Hermit make reply, but heeded not his words. He knew that nearly if not all of the outlaws had borne them company, and not knowing how long his opportunity might last, he drew a revolver and dashed away at full speed for the point where the fire blazed.

A single glance showed him that the ledge was deserted, and replacing his revolver, he unslung his lasso as he ran.

A single thrust of his foot sent the blazing fagots flying from the trunk of the tree, and he almost groaned aloud as he saw how terribly near they had accomplished their work. The cedar tree was already beginning to bend beneath the weight of that hapless scout, and the resinous wood was glowing fiercely. Five minutes more—even less would end all!

It had been Hardy Zeph's intention to run out upon the tree trunk, grasp the lasso and thus draw up the helpless body, but he saw that to attempt this now would be fatal. His added weight would snap the remaining fibers, and both would be hurled down to certain death upon the cruel rocks below.

There was only one chance, and his quick wit, sharpened by the emergency, led him to divine this. Crouching low on the very verge of the dizzy height, he swung his coiled lasso to and fro, then made his cast. The feat was a peculiarly difficult one.

The body of the young spy hung head downward, full a score feet below the tree trunk, with hands and arms securely pinioned to his sides. The lasso must be cast or swung downward with a quick jerk in order to pass the noose over the helpless youth's head and shoulders. The full difficulty of this feat can scarcely be imagined, without ocular demonstration. If such ordinarily, how much more difficult now, when the loss of even one minute might be fatal—when at any moment the fire-weakened tree trunk might snap beneath the weight suspended thus, or the outlaws might return to make sure their horrible work was well done?

Twice Hardy Zeph made the cast, only to fail, and each time he groaned in bitter agony as he hurriedly drew up the lasso for another attempt. It was horrible—to be almost within arm's-length of his loved friend, yet unable to aid him—perhaps to witness his death—!

"Ef he dies, so do I!" grated the boy trailer as he made his third attempt—and barely smothered a glad shout as he saw the pliant noose catch upon the shoulders of the hanging youth, then draw firm and snug!

None too soon. The tree top was slowly bending lower. The insidious fire had eaten through the heart of the trunk. Should it give way—would he be able to withstand the strain? No, no mortal man could. He would be dragged down to death together with his heart-brother!

Realizing this peril, Hardy Zeph drew his lasso taut, bringing the helpless youth close in against the face of the precipice, then wound the slack around a heavy rock.

Then he drew his knife and hurled it through the air. True to its aim, the glittering steel struck the other lasso and cut it through, then fell with a clatter upon the rocks below.

Once more grasping his lariat, Hardy Zeph exerted his strength to the utmost, raising the lifeless form foot by foot and drawing it over the escarpment. He knelt beside the body and peered into the fair young face, and as the full rays of the moon lighted it up, he cried in great joy:

"Dainty Lance, thank God! I got yore in time!"

CHAPTER IX.

A TRAITOR UNMASKED.

As he spoke, Frank Kruger arose unilystead and looked at Sibyl with a maudlin smile upon his face and the ugly fire of unholy passion burning deeper in his bloodshot eyes. At a glance she realized the full extent of the peril which threatened her.

She knew now that she had been deceived by this wretch with his smooth tongue and plausible lies, that she had by that blinding confidence placed herself wholly in his power—at the mercy of a liquor crazed ruffian!

Yet she faced him now with angry scorn rather than fear, and whisky-drenched though he was, Frank Kruger shrunk away from those imperious eyes as she spoke:

"You have been making a beast of yourself with liquor. Do not address me again until you have recovered your senses."

It was a bold but risky experiment. For a moment it seemed to Sibyl that she had succeeded, for the drunken ruffian shrunk away and a red flush covered his pale cheeks as his eyes slowly drooped abashed. But this was only momentary; Kruger raised his head and flung back his long locks with a defiant toss, laughing shortly.

"You ride with a stiff curb, my dear, but it won't do," he said, and as if by magic all traces of drunkenness vanished, both from his face and voice, though his eyes were still bloodshot. "The fact is, you have found your master at last, and may as well yield gracefully as to make a fuss about the matter, since that can't help you."

"Then all you told me was false—from first to last you have lied to me—played the part of a base traitor!"

"Hard words break no bones, my dainty bird of paradise, and if you think a little scolding will relieve your mind, I'll stand up and take it like a man!" laughed Kruger.

Sibyl made no response. The reckless manner in which the handsome ruffian spoke confirmed her worst fears. She knew that she had been betrayed under the mask of friendship, and that now she was wholly at his mercy. Yet her courage did not fail her. The heavy sinking of her heart was not suffered to betray itself in her face, and with cold disdain she confronted the unmasked traitor.

Kruger would have felt more at ease had his fair victim burst into a torrent of reproaches, or if she had in fear and trembling implored him to have mercy on her tearful helplessness. This icy composure was something new to him. He could not understand it, and he felt a growing uneasiness. Surely she must possess some resource to which he held no clew? And the more surely to discover this, he entirely removed his mask.

"The world must be coming to an end when a woman who has as good an excuse for railing as I have given you holds her tongue in peace," he said, with a mocking laugh, reseating himself and leisurely filling his pipe. "But since you disdain to ask questions, I'll answer them anyway."

"Doubtless you have been told a thousand times that you are an extraordinarily beautiful and dainty package of flesh and blood. If not, the men you have met were as blind as moles and tongue-tied in the bargain."

"Like many another soft-hearted fool, I dare say, I fell over head and ears in love with you the moment I beheld your face—and from that instant I resolved that you should be mine, by fair means or foul."

"You see, I don't try to spare myself or to gloss the matter over by specious pleading. I admit that I have been a 'bad man,' to use the vernacular, in my earlier days, nor am I much better now. I lied to you when I claimed to be a detective—instead, I am the fugitive from justice, an outlaw, a road-agent, and second in command of the gang we gave the slip last night."

"In brief, a liar, villain and traitor to one who trusted her life and honor in your keeping."

"Exactly," coolly retorted Kruger, looking as though he really relished the stinging epithets.

"But I had an unusually fair excuse for my

actions. And then you were really in danger of meeting a far worse fate than now awaits you—"

He was interrupted by a low laugh, so scornful and full of skepticism that it pierced even his tough skin, flushing his cheek hotly. But his voice was calm and equable as ever when he continued.

"I anticipated your doubts, but sober reflection will convince you that I am right. All I told you last night was gospel truth, except that about my being a detective and in the employ of Lancelot Daintree."

"I never heard of that worthy before last night, and the story I told you was suggested by what I heard when eavesdropping the man who called himself your father, and Wilbur Mason."

"To be just to myself, the instant I saw you, I resolved that you should come to no harm while I could defend you, and I meant to set you and yours free, even at the risk of my life. Not altogether without selfishness, I believed you would be grateful, and as I am not absolutely hideous in face or person, I hoped to win your love in return."

"But then I saw there was some secret between the captain and the old man, and so, when they withdrew to the old hut, I eavesdropped them, overhearing what altered all my half-formed plans."

"It was a strange story I heard then, and I don't know as I can blame you if you refuse to give it credence. But if you had heard their tones and seen their faces as I heard and saw them, you must have been convinced."

"The old man's name is Howard Glenn, and no more your father than I am. He loved your mother, they were betrothed and the wedding day came. The bride was at the altar, and the bridegroom came—but carried in, dead drunk, by his boon companions. There was a row, of course, ending in the marriage of the lady to another gentleman—your father."

"Through revenge, as time went on, Howard Glenn abducted you and your two brothers, the youngest being your twin. The shock killed your mother, and when he realized this, Glenn went mad, and fled with you to the mountains."

"It would consume too much time to tell you the whole story. Enough that your real father still lives, a wealthy banker in Missouri; that both of your brothers are alive, one of them with his father and lately married, the other—your twin—still ignorant of his parentage and true relationship to you, though he and you have met—"

Until this stage, Sibyl had listened with an incredulous smile upon her lips, but now her face turned a shade paler, and a wilder look came into her eyes. She remembered the words spoken by the Mad Hermit concerning Dainty Lance—could it be possible that they were true?

"I see this part of my story is not wholly strange to you," added Kruger, smiling with a certain satisfaction as he noted her change of countenance. "The young fellow you have known as Dainty Lance is really Horace Ballou, your twin brother!"

"A very ingenious tale," said Sibyl, with a scornful smile, her voice ringing with unutterable contempt. "Could you not furnish me with a sister or two, to make the whole more complete?"

"I'll do even better than that, and furnish you with a husband," coolly retorted the traitor, showing his white teeth maliciously. "A young, not bad looking nor wholly illiterate fellow, who only needs such a wife as you can be, if you choose, to become an honest and reputable member of society—in other words, myself!"

Sibyl laughed bitterly. There was a certain grim humor in the matchless impudence of this scoundrel that, despite the peril she was then in, almost amused her.

"You see now why I changed my plans," continued Kruger, self-complacently, yet all the time keeping a close watch upon the maiden whose dauntless spirit and bearing rendered him suspicious. "Your father is wealthy, and can afford to give you a fine dowry, especially as your husband will be the means of restoring his lost child to his paternal arms. You cannot marry Dainty Lance because he is your brother. You must marry me, because you cannot help yourself."

"I would rather die, first!" indignantly cried the maiden.

"My dear," and there was a horrible significance in his tones as he spoke, "there are things which foolish girls consider even worse than death. I mean to watch over and guard you too closely for the last to claim you—but the

other may be your fate if you remain obstinately blind to what is for your own good.

"Meet me half-way, and I will treat you with all the respect and reverence due the highest lady in the land. But act like a foolish, perverse child, and I will crush down your feeble opposition without mercy. If you come to harm in the struggle, blame your own folly.

"I offer you my terms. Swear by all you hold sacred—I will dictate an oath that I know you will not dare to break—that you will marry me as soon as we can find a minister or a justice of the peace, and I will be your slave, now and forever. Refuse—but you will not be so mad as to refuse."

"If I refuse? Go on," coldly demanded Sibyl.

"Well, then I will serve you according to your folly. Before you leave these rocks—ay! before you leave this very spot—before that sun reaches the meridian—you shall beg and pray as the greatest possible favor, for that very offer of marriage. This I swear to you, by heaven and hell!" cried Kruger, his bloodshot eyes once more aflame with an evil, cruel light, his face flushing.

There could be no doubting either his meaning or his earnestness. Brutal passion was written upon every feature. As well hope mercy from the hungry panther whose teeth have closed upon the throat of a fawn.

Sibyl made no reply, but cast one swift glance around them, then sunk down upon the stones as if in despair.

A mocking laugh broke from the lips of the handsome ruffian opposite as he saw this, for he believed he had conquered—that his horrible threat had utterly broken the spirit of the helpless maiden—but he laughed too soon.

Sibyl's hand closed upon a rough, jagged stone, and with a strength lent by the emergency, she flung this missile fairly into the villain's face, knocking him over backward, then leaping up and fleeing along the trail with the swiftness of a terrified fawn.

Severe as had been that blow—and his shapely nose was flattened almost to a level with his cheeks, while he spat out several teeth together with blood and furious curses—Frank Kruger leaped to his feet and dashed after the flying form of the maiden, shouting out fearful threats and imprecations.

Strong and active though he was, the outlaw saw that he was gradually losing ground, and insane with rage, he drew his pistol and fired two shots after the fugitive.

As the last report rung out, Sibyl fell heavily to the ground, and with a mad yell of triumph, Kruger reached her side. But ere he could touch her with his eager grasp, a third report smote upon the air, and without a groan he fell across her body, a bullet through his brain!

CHAPTER X.

SEARCH FOR THE MISSING.

TERRIBLE as was the ordeal through which he had passed, the young spy had not entirely lost his consciousness, and as he was drawn from his perilous position by Hardy Zeph and laid upon the ground, his blue eyes opened when he heard the heartfelt thanksgiving uttered above him. Then, his voice still husky, he muttered:

"Who are you? Not one of those merciless scoundrels?"

"It's me—old Zeph—don't you know?" half-sobbed, half-laughed the overjoyed boy trailer.

"I never saw you before, but I thank you all the same. Only for you—another minute, and I would have been down there—a shapeless mass upon those rocks! Ah! it was horrible!" he added with a sickening shudder, "to hang there—to see the rocks so far below—to feel the tree giving way beneath my weight as the fire burned deeper—to feel that I was doomed to death! I wonder that I did not go mad!"

It is doubtful if Hardy Zeph heard more than the first and last sentence of this speech. Never saw him before—and for years they had been inseparable companions, through good and evil, through storms and sunshine, when death stared them in the face—had they not stood shoulder to shoulder like the true heart-brothers they were, through it all? Surely he had gone mad!

With trembling fingers Hardy Zeph unbound the lasso that enveloped the young spy, not daring to speak again lest his worst fears should be realized, and he found that his friend had indeed gone crazy. And still in silence he helped the partly paralyzed youth to regain his feet.

Bewildered and pained though he was, the kee-witted boy trailer did not forget that great danger still hung over them, and as soon as his companion could stand alone, he hastily collected the still blazing fagots and replaced them upon the burning tree trunk.

"Why take so much trouble?" asked the rescued scout, in a puzzled tone. "The tree will soon fall of its own weight, and we are losing time that had better be spent in getting away from this dangerous spot."

"S'pose the tree shouldn't fall afore some o' them

p'izen imps come back? They'd see 'at you'd got loose, an' then to keep thar bloody secrets safe, wouldn't they hunt us both down without mercy? Let the tree burn through, an' they'll think you're down yonder with it; long enough, anyhow, fer us to clean break our trail an' give 'em the slip fer good."

"You are right—there it goes!" he exclaimed, as the eager flames ate through the remaining fibers and the tree went crashing down the precipice.

"Kiver! by the Lord, they're coming back!" grated Hardy Zeph, grasping the young spy by the arm and darting back to where the shelf ended in masses of rocks. "Take this pistol—lay low—but ef they sight us, give 'em the best you've got!"

Crouching low in the dense shadow cast by an overhanging rock, Hardy Zeph thrust a revolver into his companion's hand, and similarly armed himself, waited in breathless silence for the coming of their foes. But several moments passed without further sound, and Hardy Zeph was just beginning to believe his ears had deceived him, when the echo of footsteps was heard among the rocks above their covert, and the voice of a man came to their ears.

"I could almost swear that I caught a glimpse of some one moving by the tree!" and the young scout grated his teeth in rising rage, as he recognized the cruel voice of Wilbur Mason. "It don't seem possible that that young rascal can have freed himself, and yet, if he should—he knows all our secrets!"

"Not now—the tree has fallen, and he with it," came a voice that Hardy Zeph instantly recognized. "While we are wasting time here, my child, my poor Sibyl—"

"A minute more or less won't make much matter there, but if that rascal has got loose, and chances to stumble across Morgan's Man-hunters, we may find them awaiting us when we return to the den," responded Wilbur Mason, scrambling down the rocks.

Hardy Zeph heard a faint click, and felt rather than saw, that his companion, driven nearly mad by the terrible torture this ruffian had caused him to endure, was preparing to shoot him down the instant he came in sight of their ambush.

It was a critical moment. There was no time for argument or reasoning, and even if that was attempted, a single word above the breath might be sufficient to reveal their presence to the road-agent chief, at whose call a horde of ruthless enemies would pounce down upon them. Burning powder then would kill more than the one at whom the bullet was aimed.

Knowing this, Hardy Zeph caught the hand of his friend and pressed the pistol muzzle against his own breast. It was a bold action, but its purpose could not be mistaken. And once more that night did Wilbur Mason escape death by barely a hair's breadth.

He strode to where the stump of the cedar tree was still blazing, and bending forward, peered down the precipice. The base was still in the shadow, but he could see here and there a scattered spark where a living coal still gleamed.

"Come!" impatiently cried the Mad Hermit, as Wilbur Mason straightened up and began peering into the shadows that lined the rear of the shelf. "While we are dallying here, that scoundrel is bearing my poor child away—ten thousand curses rest upon his head!"

The reader will remember that the Mad Hermit was present when Wilbur Mason flung the bound and helpless spy over the precipice, but shortly afterward, he turned away from the spot and went back to the cavern, his brain busy with the plausible story he must tell his daughter, as he had long ago learned to regard Sibyl, or Grace Ballou.

He found the main chamber wholly deserted, every man having rushed out at their captain's danger signal and all of them remaining to witness the punishment of the daring spy.

There was only one other passage leading from the chamber, and taking one of the lamps, he followed it in search of the maiden.

A few moments brought him to the little stone cell in which the prisoners had been stowed away, but now occupied only by the giant negro, whose heavy breathing instantly aroused the suspicions of the Mad Hermit. A single glance showed him that Sibyl was not there, and he saw, too, that this cell was the end of the passage he had followed, having passed by the elevated entrance to the side tunnel without observing it.

In an instant he was beside the unconscious negro, vainly trying to arouse him. The scent of whisky was very strong, and the practiced nose of the Mad Hermit soon detected the peculiar odor of opium, coming from the emptied flask beside Hercules.

His first thought was that Wilbur Mason had been playing a double game, thus making sure of his fair prize in case her father should defy him, and it was with a fierce yearning for revenge that the Mad Hermit rushed out of the cavern before Hardy Zeph's eyes. Luckily for Wilbur Mason, some of his men interposed, and the bitter surprise he could counterfeit on hearing the startling tidings, told Howard Glenn he was as innocent as himself.

Together they rushed back to the cavern, and strove to restore the giant negro to consciousness, but in vain. He had swallowed a very large dose of the drug, and it was doubtful whether he would ever awaken in this life.

After the first flurry of surprise and confusion, Wilbur Mason mustered his men in the large chamber, finding all answering to their names but his lieutenant, Frank Kruger. This turned suspicion upon him, and the statements made by Lambert and Keeble, the two guards, substantiated as they were

by the other outlaws, indicated the traitor without a doubt.

"He could not have brought her through here without being detected," cried Mason, catching up a lamp. "They fled through the back door!"

A brief examination of the seldom used side passage confirmed this opinion. Here and there in the dry dust could be distinguished two different-sized foot-prints, one unmistakably that of a woman. And hastening along in vague hopes of finding the fugitives still in the tunnel, Wilbur Mason at length emerged from the ground with an exclamation of angry disappointment.

It was this sound that came to the wary ears of Hardy Zeph and sent him with his companion under cover.

The hot impatience of the Mad Hermit caused the road-agent to cease his search among the shadows for the form he had really caught a glimpse of through the leafy screen above, and thereby saved his worthless life, for had discovery come, his would have been the first death in the tragedy.

In silence the two scouts listened until the sound of footsteps died entirely away, then Hardy Zeph, still in fear for the brain of his friend, finally ventured:

"It was a mighty close call, Lance—"

"That makes twice you have called me by that name," interrupted the other. "Am I so much like your friend then? One of those men—the old one, with white hair and beard—would have it that I was Dainty Lance, or Lancelot Daintree, and now you—"

"Clean gone!" groaned Hardy Zeph, bitter anguish in his tones. "Gone clean crazy—Lord help us both!"

Despite himself, the young spy laughed aloud, but as quickly checked his mirth as he felt a hot burning tear fall upon his hand. Then, deeply touched, he said:

"My friend, I have not gone crazy. I am not Dainty Lance, but if all I have heard this night be true, then I am Dainty Lance's brother!"

Hardy Zeph stared at the speaker in mingled amazement and doubt. He did not talk like one gone mad; and yet—this was Dainty Lance or else his spirit, his double!

"My name is Harry Ballou, my home is Clayton, Missouri, and I came out here in quest of a villain who robbed my father of a very large sum of money. Instead of catching him, I was caught myself—for the thief is the man you just kept me from killing, Wilbur Mason, head devil of this gang of road-agents."

As he spoke, a flood of light burst upon the bewildered mind of the boy trailer. He remembered that name, remembered that once before, in the days gone by, he had mistaken this man for his besom friend, Dainty Lance, and the memory came back, too, of how generously Harry Ballou had come forward at the end of that unfortunate series of adventures, and enabled Dainty Lance to escape with his life.*

"I know ye now!" he cried, warmly grasping the speaker's hand with both of his horny palms. "An' thar ain't but one livin' soul I'd ruther see than you! I was nigh at the time when you saved Lance that night when the pore gal shot herself—"

It was now young Ballou's turn to be surprised. He had forgotten the great resemblance which had enabled him to save the young bank-robber, and until this moment he never suspected the identity of that person with Dainty Lance, whom he now believed was really his brother.

"Can it be—was that man Dainty Lance?" he ejaculated.

"Nothin' shorter—but I never hearn Lance tell of a brother," and Hardy Zeph's inborn suspicion showed itself. "You look like two bullets run in the same pa'r o' molds—"

"It's a long story—too long to tell now," said Harry, hurriedly, remembering the words spoken by the Mad Hermit in urging the road-agents to haste. "You heard what that man said? The child he spoke about, I believe is my sister—the sister of Dainty Lance as you call him—"

"Not the lady-bird—not Sibyl?"

"Yes—they were taken prisoners by the road-agents, and now she must have fled, either alone or with some one of the rascals who may be playing a double part, who may mean her evil! By your friendship for Lance, my brother, I ask your assistance—"

"It's yourn afore you ax it. Not only fer her sake—an' she is a angel on airth! but beca'se of Lance. He loves her more'n his own life. An' well he may, fer they was jest gittin' married to each other—"

"They are brother and sister—thank God! they were saved from that sin, even at the cost of such bitter pain."

Hardy Zeph could not feel so thankful, for he knew how terribly bitter the blow had been to his heart-brother, and he had believed the whole thing a lie hatched up by the Mad Hermit the more surely to separate the lovers.

But there was no more time to waste in talk. At any moment the road-agents might come upon and capture the fair fugitive. They must be near enough in such a case to see, if they were unable to act.

This promised to be a difficult as well as dangerous piece of work, but neither of the young men hesitated. Both had powerful motives to lead them on, and with Hardy Zeph in the lead, they stole silently away in the direction taken by the Mad Hermit and the outlaw chief.

For some little distance the outlaws pressed on rapidly, since, after leaving the cave at the point

* The reader is referred to HALF-DIME LIBRARY No. 144.

they had, the fugitives could only follow the one course, unless they had doubled back along the ledge, an impossible feat since it had been occupied by the road-agents. But then they came to a point where any one of a dozen different courses might have been taken, and there they were nonplused for the future. Even by the light of torches they found it impossible to discover a trail upon that hard, stony soil, and though with great reluctance and many curses, they settled down to await the dawn of day.

Both Hardy Zeph and Harry Ballou crept up close enough to this bivouac to overhear much of the talk that passed between Mason and Glenn while their fellows slept, and from this they learned that Sibyl had fled with Frank Kruger, for whom nothing Mason could say was too bad.

"The devil ain't never so bad as he's painted," philosophically observed Hardy Zeph as he noted the gloomy foreboding of his new-found friend, when they had retreated to a safe distance. "The wuss that p'izen critter 'buses him, the better 'pinion I hev of this Frank Kruger. 'Course he ain't a angel, or he'd never 'a' consorted with sich ornery imps as them, but fer all that, he may be a tol'able squar' sort o' feller, an' actin' honest in helping lady-bird away from the hawk's nest. 'T any rate, nobody but a born devil could bring hisself to hurt her."

This was cold comfort, but it was better than none, and reaching a point among the thick-lying rocks where they could watch the movements of the enemy without much risk of discovery when day should come, the two scouts passed away the remainder of the night.

With the first gleam of light above the eastern hills, the outlaws were afoot, but it was full an hour later when a loud shout from old Rubber announced the finding of the trail.

Even then their progress was very slow, the nature of the soil requiring a careful examination, and in places even inch by inch, before the trail once lost could be regained.

Thanks to this, the young trailers found little difficulty in keeping close to the enemy, and at the same time maintaining the necessary secrecy. Nor were Hardy Zeph's eyes idle as the hours wore on. He scanned the country around them, hoping to discover the fugitives by this means and join them before the enemy tracked them home.

At length a low exclamation from the boy trailer's lips attracted the attention of Harry Ballou. Hardy Zeph was gazing intently toward a point several miles distant.

"What is it? Do you see them?" eagerly demanded Harry.

"A dozen turkey-buzzards—that's what I see," responded the lad, shortly, while there was a shade of uneasiness in his tones that Harry could not help noting.

"What of that? You can see the filthy birds almost anywhere, at all hours of the day."

"But when you see 'em actin' like them, yender, then it means somethin'. Come—we want to git over thar as quick as we kin without lettin' them two-legged hounds see us, an' afore they notice how them birds is actin'."

"You don't think anything has happened to her—to my sister?" faltered Ballou, his cheeks paling at the dread thought.

"I don't think nothin'," shortly responded Zeph, backing out from his covert. "I know that thar's dead meat over yender whar them buzzards is settlin'—but whether man or beast I kin tell better when we git thar."

His blood chilling as his fancy ran riot, Harry Ballou followed closely upon the heels of his companion, and in a few minutes more they were hidden from the enemy by a low, long ridge of rocks. Behind this they hastened along, both fearing the worst, yet eager to reach the spot where the birds of carrion had settled to their unholy feast.

This was a work of time and precaution, for should their movements be noted by the outlaws, chase would be made, almost as a matter of course. But Hardy Zeph was a born scout, and as Harry Ballou closely imitated his actions, in something less than an hour they succeeded in reaching a point close to where the foul birds had settled, and from whence they could see them at work, tearing and picking at some object, fighting each other with wing and beak in their greediness.

Harry Ballou turned sick and faint, for he recognized what had been a human being in that mutilated object, but Hardy Zeph ran forward and soon put the vultures to flight.

"Come down," he cried a moment later, after stooping over the loathsome mass. "It's a man, an' nobody we know, I don't reckon."

At this Harry came forward, glancing around fearfully in dread of seeing another shape, but his dread was groundless.

Meanwhile Hardy Zeph was coolly examining a brace of revolvers, one of which he took from the dead man's belt, together with a knife, the other from where it lay upon the blood-stained ground.

"Two loads gone out o' this one," he said, as Harry came up. "Fresh fired—leastways since last night. Bin a fight, I reckon. Durn them pesky buzzards! They'll keep hoverin' over this bit o' carrion until some o' them p'izen imps sight 'em an' git thar cur'osity up, ef they hain't done it a'ready. Best climb up them rocks an' take a look. 'Twould be mighty onhealthy fer us ef they was to stumble onto us now."

Harry promptly obeyed, and had scarcely reached the point indicated before he turned and came running back.

"They're coming!" he exclaimed, as Hardy Zeph looked up from something that had brought a strange light into his eyes.

"See thar!" and he pointed down to a pool of coagulated blood.

In the center of this was the perfect outline of a woman's foot.

CHAPTER XI.

HOST OR JAILER?

A LOUD, angry shout accompanied the fatal rifle shot, and as Frank Kruger plunged forward, falling across the prostrate form of the maiden, a pellet of lead tearing its way through his brain, the skillful marksman rushed forward at break-neck speed over the thick-lying bowlders.

With a fierce cry that was half anguish, half hatred, he grasped the corpse and flung it viciously aside, then knelt beside the maiden, raising her in his arms and pressing passionate kisses upon her pale face.

"There is magic in a kiss"—so the poet sings, and this assertion seemed confirmed in the present case, for the native red quickly came back to the maiden's cheeks, and her large blue eyes opened, no longer filled with unutterable horror, but with the warm light of a pure and all-absorbing love.

"Lancelot—I knew you would come to save me!" she murmured softly, her now red lips touching his.

"That villain shot you—you are hurt!"

"No. I could hear his bullets, but they passed me in the air. I stumbled and fell, caught my foot in yonder crack, I believe. The fall stunned me, I suppose, for I knew nothing more until I felt your arms around me, your warm kisses upon my face."

There was no exhibition of mock modesty. Sibyl made no attempt to free herself, as a more sophisticated girl would have done, for she felt perfectly happy as she was, and had not yet learned the wisdom of false pretenses. Eager as she was to reassure her anxious lover, the very tone in which she uttered these words told how perfectly happy she now felt. Softly, slowly breathed, like one almost half asleep, her lithe form yielding unresistingly to his close embrace—if they could only live thus forever!

In nine cases out of ten, it is the man who unthinkingly mars his own bliss, nor was Dainty Lance an exception on this occasion.

"Tell me, darling, how came you here, and with that cowardly ruffian?" he asked, withdrawing his lips from a long, fervent kiss. "I have searched for you so long—have followed your trail so far hoping against hope and fighting down despair, that I can hardly realize the truth, hardly bring myself to believe that this is indeed you I hold in my arms!"

One more kiss, then Sibyl gently withdrew herself from his encircling arms, the warm flush slowly dying out from her cheeks. A sad smile came to her lips as she encountered Dainty Lance's wondering gaze.

"It is a long and painful story brother—"

"No, no!" cried Dainty Lance, his face paling but his eyes growing brighter as he heard that title—dear enough under ordinary circumstances, but more bitter than gall when it came from her lips and addressed to him. "That was but a lie of his, concocted the more surely to separate us. You are not my sister—you are my wife!"

"Lancelot," she said, softly yet with a resolution he could not mistake, "Heaven knows how happy I would be if I only knew you were right in this. I have freely confessed my love for you—I do not deny that it has grown stronger and more fervent with every day of our enforced separation, despite the repeated assurance given me by—by my father, that we are brother and sister, both his offspring. Like you I have hoped and prayed that there might be some mistake—that you could advance undoubted proof that your parents were not also mine—"

Here she paused, her gaze fixed upon the face of her lover, as though hoping he could give her the needed assurance. But this he was unable to do. The days of his early childhood were buried in obscurity which he was unable to penetrate. Who his parents were or had been, he could tell no more than if he had "grewed like Topsy."

"You see," resumed the maiden, her voice sounding sadder than ever, but none the less resolute, "the strange story he tells may be true. That, or what that bad man," with a shuddering glance toward the corpse of Frank Kruger, "asserted he overheard last night."

Here Sibyl gave a brief synopsis of what the dead traitor told her when he induced her to flee from the den of the outlaws, as well as his words of that morning.

"A foul lie!" cried Dainty Lance, impatiently. "Could such a treacherous wretch be believed?"

"And yet he must have heard something, else how came he to know aught of our past? I never met him before, and you say he is a perfect stranger to you."

This was an unpleasant truth which Dainty Lance himself had noticed and been disagreeably impressed by, though he had smothered it down until Sibyl spoke of it.

"No, Lance, I, like you, hope and pray that it may all prove false—a cruel mistake; but while there is any reasonable doubt, we must be no more than brother and sister to each other. You know those terrible Indians came upon us before that good old priest completed the ceremony—we are not man and wife, even if there be no bar between us."

"You seem to be glad of it!" grumbled Dainty Lance, man-like.

"I am, and so will you be, when you bring yourself to look at the matter calmly. So far, there has been no shadow of sin in our love—let it be so to the end. We are young, and can afford to wait. The truth must come out sometime, if we are only patient."

This reasoning was more satisfactory to her than to Dainty Lance, for of all unreasonable animals, a

young man over head and ears in love is the worst. But he knew Sibyl well enough to realize the folly of trying to change her mind when this was once fairly formed.

Before he had time to shape his reply, a sudden change in the countenance of the maiden startled him, and wheeling quickly in the direction of her startled glance, Dainty Lance confronted a man; not twenty yards away.

His first thought was the same as that which struck Sibyl. This man was one of the outlaw band who had discovered her flight, and scattered in search of her, and quick as a flash, his revolver was drawn, cocked and covering the stranger as he cried in a low, stern voice:

"Offer to raise an alarm, and you are a dead man!"

The intruder did not flinch, but stood as when first discovered, his slender built but lithe and muscular form drawn up to its full height, his arms carelessly folded across his swelling chest. The only change that came over him at Dainty Lance's threatening action, was a quiet smile that showed his white teeth beneath his drooping mustache.

He was a model of manly grace and beauty as he stood thus, his personal advantages admirably displayed by the suit he wore—the national costume of a native Californian, of rich material and profusely ornamented with gold lace, buttons and virgin nuggets. The sash of China crape which girdled his waist hung heavy with weapons, knife hilt and pistol-butts being inlaid with gold, but he made no attempt to touch these, though the revolver of the boy-trailer was fairly covering his heart.

"You threaten, but you will not fire, sir," he said, still smiling, his voice soft and musical as that of a woman.

"Who and what are you?" demanded Lance, sternly.

"One who could have slain you both, long before the fair lady discovered me, had I been so inclined," was the cool response. "Had I meant you harm, you would never have drawn that weapon. Even now, secure as you deem yourself, a single sign from me would bring death to you so suddenly that you would not have time to discharge even one shot."

"Don't be so sure," retorted Dainty Lance, keeping his weapon at a level. "A flash of lightning could not slay me quick enough to save you from my bullet."

"Let it go at that, then," smiled the stranger.

"Again I say I come here as your friend."

"And I repeat, what and who are you?" retorted Lance.

"Your host, and you are my guests for the present."

"Not without our free consent—"

"With or without it, young sir," and there was a sterner ring to the stranger's voice. "You are surrounded by twenty men, any one of whom can plant a bullet in a man's eye as far as they can see it."

"He speaks the truth, Lance," murmured Sibyl.

"I can see their heads peering over the rocks! Do not resist—"

Fearing for his life, more than her own, the maiden swiftly passed around her lover and interposed her own form between his pistol and the stranger, who promptly took advantage of the opportunity thus offered. He uttered a sharp whistle, and a dozen fully-armed men rose up from the rocks where they had found concealment, their weapons covering the forms of the lovers.

Dainty Lance saw that all was lost, if these men were indeed enemies, but he cried out resolutely:

"Safety for this lady, on your honor, or we both die here!"

"I will give the pledge you ask," cried a clear, musical voice, as a light form appeared behind the stranger. "No harm shall come to her, by the throne of Our Holy Mother!"

Though clad in masculine habiliments, the sex of the speaker could not be thus concealed. A woman, with skin and hair as fair as those of Sibyl, with a face of rare beauty and a form that was the perfection of voluptuous grace and symmetry.

A slight frown darkened the brow of the tall stranger, but then a smile chased the ugly look away.

"You hear, sir? You have a more sacred pledge than any I could give you. Be wise and submit to the inevitable. To resist would be the worst of folly, and besides, we are acting for your own good. The band of outlaws and cut-throats from whom the lady made her escape last night, are diligently searching for her, and are working in this direction. Left alone, you must sooner or later be taken. With us, you are safe."

"He speaks true, senor," added the woman, coming to Sibyl's side and encircling her waist with one arm. "I promise the lady my protection."

Dainty Lance lowered his pistol and returned it to his belt. Though his suspicions of intended evil were not wholly lulled, he knew that resistance could end only in his own death, when Sibyl would be left wholly at the mercy of these persons. Better live and watch for a better chance to escape the toils.

"To prove my words, senor," added the stranger, "come with me to yonder point of rocks. From there you can see the searchers for this lady."

"Then, if you are honest men, why not await their coming?" demanded Dainty Lance. "From ambush here, we could handle them easy enough, and thus rid these hills of one bitter, black curse!"

"We will leave a plain trail for them to follow, and lead them into a trap from whence escape will be impossible," returned the stranger with a smile.

"You will not accept my invitation?"

"Your word is quite sufficient," replied Dainty

Lance determined not to be drawn away from the side of Sibyl.

"Thanks, senor," bowed the gorgeous stranger. "Then we will retire. Will you assist your lady friend? The trail is not long, but a somewhat difficult one for dainty feet."

Refusal could do no good, so Dainty Lance and Sibyl bore their persistent host company with the best grace they could summon. The trail was indeed rough, which accounted for the half-centaur Californians being found on foot, but in something less than an hour, the party entered a low, beautiful and fertile valley surrounded on all sides by frowning hills save at the point where they emerged, a narrow defile. Here were scattered a number of cosy white tents, while fine horses were grazing near by.

During the walk, Dainty Lance was busy thinking. From the first, he felt that he and Sibyl were more captives than guests, and reflection did not clear away this suspicion.

Now, as he entered the little valley and saw the camp, a still more disagreeable suspicion struck him. He saw that the leader and nearly every one of the band was either native Californians, Spaniards or Mexicans.

The leader smiled as he noticed the change which swept over Dainty Lance's countenance, and said coolly:

"You are right, senor; I am Joaquín Murieta!"

CHAPTER XII.

TO THE VICTOR, THE SPOILS.

PROBABLY not one man in ten thousand living at the present day, can fully appreciate the sickening horror which Dainty Lance felt when the notorious Joaquín Murieta avowed his identity. Not on his own account. A more fearless heart never beat in human breast. But because of poor Sibyl. And, mentally, Dainty Lance registered a solemn oath that if he could not rescue her, before he himself died he would send a merciful bullet home to her heart. Better death than life in such hands.

The true, unprejudiced life of Joaquín Murieta has never yet been given to the public, and it is doubtful now whether this can ever be done. If it were, few persons who were not living in California at or soon after the years of his career, could believe the terrible record. For the three years ending in August, 1853, no one name was oftener uttered in the land of gold. During that time, Joaquín Murieta wrote his name in bloody letters in every county of the State, and at least one hundred deaths were traced back to his own hand, not counting those rolled up by his band, including his lieutenant, Manuel García, or "Three-fingered Jack," a merciless wretch who killed for the pure love of bloodshed, and whose sanguinary record of murders is even longer than his master's.

It is true that Joaquín had been given terrible cause of provocation by the Americans before he entered upon his bloody career; his brother was hung as a horse-thief; he himself was mercilessly flogged and left for dead, his young wife was outraged and left for dead, as he was, after fighting desperately in her defense. Joaquín recovered only to receive her last sigh; then over her body he swore a bitter vengeance, not alone upon the dastardly miscreants who had wronged him, but on the entire race of English speaking people—and scores of nameless graves tell how terribly he kept that oath.

Even after all this, the man was not all evil. On more than one occasion he was known to display qualities of honor and generosity such as few had given him credit for possessing—bright roses in a desert of crime.

Dainty Lance had been in California long enough to hear all this and more about the Pirate of the Placers, and like nearly every man of American or English descent then in the State, he looked upon Joaquín Murieta as a veritable fiend. Little wonder, then, that his heart sunk low in his breast as he thought of Sibyl in the power of such a merciless demon.

His first impulse was to encircle Sibyl with one arm and fight his way through the enemy, making sure of Joaquín with his first shot, but a single glance showed him that this desperate project was impossible. The woman who had pledged her word for the safety of the maiden, had led Sibyl away toward the tents. Dainty Lance was surrounded by a dozen thoroughly armed men. He might shoot down Joaquín, and possibly several more before being killed himself, but he could never have broken that circle alive.

Joaquín smiled grimly as though he divined the desperate thoughts of the boy trailer.

"You will not be so foolish, I am sure, senor. You and the lady need fear no harm. You are our guests. If your enemies follow your trail, we will fight for you—and that being the case, discard your weapons. Their weight must fatigue you, and you have no further need of them. It would be a grievous sin against hospitality were we to suffer danger to come so near our guests as to require of them the use of arms in self defense!"

If Dainty Lance had had any remaining doubts, they would have been dispelled by this elaborate speech. He and his loved one were deep in the snare, and whipping forth a revolver he covered the mocking outlaw.

"Hold! let no one fire!" cried Joaquín, as his men also brought their weapons to bear. "Senor, look to where your lady friend stands. You may kill me, but I will have fair company on the long trail."

This warning was unnecessary. Even as he raised his pistol, Dainty Lance saw the woman grasp Sibyl and hold a glittering dagger suspended over her heart.

"Beware, senor!" came the clear voice, still musical, but now ringing out menacingly. "Lower your weapon, or I drive this steel to the hilt in your lady-love's heart!"

Sibyl's danger did what naught else could have accomplished. Dainty Lance lowered his revolver, all unmanned, and Joaquín Murieta raised one hand.

Instantly the young scout was grasped by a dozen strong hands and disarmed before he could offer the slightest resistance.

"That will do—fall back!" cried the outlaw chief, sharply, as several keen weapons hung quivering above the young man's head, the eyes of those who held them looking eagerly toward their master for permission to drive their steel home. "Would you dishonor your leader's pledge?"

Instantly the cut-throats released their grasp and retreated a few steps, their weapons vanishing as if by magic. But they still formed a ring around the young American, keeping one eye upon him, the other on their chief.

The moment Dainty Lance obeyed her order, the woman released Sibyl, and it was this fact more than aught else that kept him from renewing the unequal struggle, unarmed though he now was. For himself he cared little, if only Sibyl was insured against harm.

Dainty Lance heard the last words of Murieta, and despite his critical situation, laughed aloud in bitter derision. Joaquín's cheek flushed hotly, for, unless tradition greatly belied him, he placed a very high value on his pledge which he boasted not even death could make him violate.

"The pledge of a murdering thief—of a cowardly assassin who wars on helpless women—bah!" cried Dainty Lance, his eyes ablaze, his voice ringing with utter scorn.

Joaquín's face became livid and his hand dropped upon a weapon as he took one step toward the reckless scoffer. The ring parted before him, and doubtless the road-agents one and all expected to see him slay the bold speaker off hand; but instead, he removed his hand from his weapon and motioned them to disperse.

Now as ever he was obeyed without the slightest hesitation.

"Senor," said Murieta, in a calm tone when they were alone together, "you have a bitter tongue. As a friend, I advise you, if only for the sake of your lady, yonder, to hold it under better control in future."

"So long as that tongue is mine, it shall never hesitate to utter the thoughts my brain conceives," coldly responded Dainty Lance. "And now, before your men, I say this. You are no infant, neither am I. We both are used to handling weapons. I challenge you to fight me a duel, how and where, I care not, so that it be to-day and that if I prove the victor, yonder lady is to go from here free and unharmed as she came."

"And if you are defeated?" smiled Joaquín. "Strange and improbable as it may seem to you, such a contingency is barely possible."

"Then Heaven will raise up another defender for her—for myself I care little," responded the young scout.

"Never yet did Joaquín Murieta refuse to accept a fair challenge," a little proudly uttered the chief, but then again smiling his mocking, tantalizing smile, he added: "Let us join the ladies and see what they have to say to the matter. You must remember the lady is now the guest and charge of Clarina, my wife."

The faint hope which had sprung up in Dainty Lance's bosom died away at these words, for he felt sure that Joaquín had no intention of accepting his challenge.

He said nothing, but moodily followed the notorious outlaw across to where the women stood, dark and desperate projects flitting through his brain.

The nod with which he acknowledged the outlaw's introduction to his wife was short and brusque enough, but apparently that lady expected nothing better from an ignorant American. Her air was most gracious, and compliments flowed freely from her nimble tongue.

This was Joaquín's second wife, wedded after his terrible career as the Scourge of the Mines was well begun. His meeting with her, far away in Sonora, whither he had fled to escape the Man-Hunters led by Captain Morgan, his wooing and his bearing her away from two score enraged servants led by her father, Don Sebastian Vallero, an exiled Spanish nobleman, all was romance personified, but too long a story to find place here. Enough that their honeymoon had not yet begun to wane, and that Joaquín paid far more deference to the high-born beauty who had given up all that woman commonly holds dear for his sake, than he ever granted to any other save himself.

Dainty Lance was watching for an opportunity to repeat his bold challenge, but before he could find an opening in Clarina's voluble speech, one of the band came up and respectfully saluted his chief and queen.

"Speak, Florencio," uttered Murieta.

"I make bold to claim my rights, Senor Capitan," said the man firmly but respectfully.

"To what do you allude? In what have you been injured?" a little sharply demanded the road-agent. "Tis to prevent the chance of wrong, Senor Capitan, that I speak now. You have not forgotten the laws which you made to guard against trouble and disputes arising in the family. 'Tis my turn now—and I claim this fair lady as my bride!'"

Dainty Lance had suspected some mischief from the first word spoken by the outlaw, and watched him keenly.

Young, athletic, handsome in face and form, easy and graceful in his movements: over all that inde-

scribable air of one who has carried his life in his hand ever since he was old enough to have fancies or opinions to defend. A native born Mexican, but for all that, one whom a good judge would set down as a "bad man" and "hard to handle."

Young though he was, Dainty Lance was a good judge, and he believed that this was a champion set forward, perhaps by the chief himself, to prevent an encounter between himself and Joaquín, or a square back-down on the part of the latter. And feeling confident that he must meet the emergency half-way or fare worse, Dainty Lance said:

"This lady is my wife—"

"Then I'll make her your widow, first, after which—"

The Mexican began his retort quickly enough, but it ended in a manner far different from what he intended.

Dainty Lance leaped forward, his right arm shooting forth, his tight clinched fist alighting fairly between the fellow's eyes. The blow was a tremendous one, almost incredible coming from one of the young scout's slight build, and the Mexican's head struck the ground first, ten feet and more away. But his skull was a tough one, and cat-like he leaped to his feet, flashing forth a wicked looking knife.

"Peace, Florencio!" cried Clarina, gliding between them, her hand raised commandingly. "Put up your knife."

Sullenly he obeyed, then said:

"I will have revenge—if not a coward, the senor will give me satisfaction for that blow."

"On one condition, yes," quickly responded Dainty Lance. "If I prove the victor, no one else shall claim my wife."

"Be it so—he accepts," promptly cried Joaquín, as though glad to find such a simple way out of the dilemma. "To the victor belongs the spoils, and may the best man win!"

"As the challenged party, of course I have the privilege of naming the weapons," Dainty Lance added, and Murieta bowed, though after a brief hesitation.

Clearly matters were not to be all one-sided, after all!

"Then I name revolvers and knives, both to be mounted on horseback, no outsiders to interfere after the word is given."

The face of the Mexican, which had been sullen enough until now, cleared up as Dainty Lance spoke. Like nearly all of his race, he was a superb horseman, and owned a horse that seemed his second self, so perfectly was it trained to obey his softest whisper or the slightest motion of his body when in the saddle. Joaquín, too, seemed satisfied, while Clarina wore a shade on her fair face.

"All is fair on our part after the signal is given," the Mexican hastened to say. "We can ride and dodge as we please."

"If you can dodge my bullets, you are welcome," laughed Dainty Lance, defiantly.

CHAPTER XIII.

A DASH FOR LIBERTY.

DAINTY LANCE turned to Joaquín and said:

"I would ask you to grant me two favors. One is to furnish me a good horse, the other is permission to take leave of my wife."

"Then you are not so confident of proving the victor?" and there was an ill-concealed sneer in the tones of the outlaw. "Your countrymen are not generally so modest."

"It is well enough to guard against accidents," quietly replied Dainty Lance. "I have your permission, then?"

"Certainly, senor. I never interfere between man and wife."

The answer was prompt enough, but Dainty Lance saw several of the outlaws handling their weapons with apparent carelessness while moving into such positions that the American, should he attempt to escape by flight, would be obliged to run the gantlet of their fire-arms, and he doubted not these movements were made in obedience to some secret sign from Joaquín.

His lips curled slightly, for Dainty Lance had not the slightest idea of evading the death-duel.

He drew Sibyl aside out of earshot, then spoke:

"I saw only the one chance of saving you, darling, and that I have taken," when the maiden interposed:

"You shall not risk your life for me. Even were you to conquer that man, what better will we be? His comrades will murder you! No; submit quietly. Let the rascal lay claim to me if he dare—"

"I know what you would say and do, darling, but in this you must be guided by me. I have not time to explain it all—Joaquín is moving this way already—but when we take up our positions for the duel, and all eyes are upon us, do you move out yonder and stand beside that tree. Be ready, for a moment's delay might prove fatal to us both."

He ceased abruptly, for the outlaw chief was now close at hand, and fearing lest his keen eyes should read the dangerous truth in Sibyl's face, Dainty Lance bent his head and kissed her once, then turned to meet Joaquín.

"Do not cut short your interview on my account—"

"Thanks; we have spoken all that is necessary," said Dainty Lance, coldly.

"Then, if the lady will pardon me, perhaps you will come and see the horse I have selected for you—a truly magnificent animal," added Murieta, a peculiar smile playing upon his thin lips.

Dainty Lance soon learned the meaning of that smile, when he stood before the horse which a couple of Mexicans were saddling for his use. It was a truly magnificent creature, as Joaquín said, young, high strung and full of fire—a creature on

whose speed and bottom a jockey would be willing to pit his life, but the last animal one would choose for such an encounter as the one impending. Already Florencio was in the saddle, putting his mount through its paces and displaying its thorough training to his admiring fellows.

"Well, how does the senior fancy his mount?" asked Joaquin.

"I am not hard to please about trifles," coolly retorted the boy trailer. "If any fault, the brute is too sluggish and tame. With a little more fire and spirit, he would make a tolerable mount for a child or timid woman."

Murieta stared at the lad in open-eyed amazement, for even now the vicious animal was fighting its grooms with feet and teeth, the picture of equine ferocity. Then, as he realized the sarcasm, a glow of something akin to admiration filled his eyes. No coward himself, Joaquin loved a brave man.

"Give me my weapons, and let yonder man-monkey prepare himself for work," briefly added Dainty Lance.

He carefully inspected his revolvers, removing the caps and seeing that the tubes were primed, then placed fresh caps on the nipples. A misfire might be equivalent to death.

When satisfied that his firearms had not been tampered with, Dainty Lance approached his horse and dexterously avoiding its teeth and heels, leaped lightly into the saddle.

As if by magic the two grooms were hurled a dozen yards away by the furious plunge the animal made, and then ensued a brief but terrific struggle between horse and rider to decide which should be master.

Admirable horsemen though they were, Joaquin and his bard from highest to lowest, they watched the struggle with a rapidly growing respect for the young American. Not one of their number could have managed the headstrong beast more skillfully or taught him more thoroughly the fact that a master bestrode his back.

That supercilious smile no longer curled the lips of the Mexican duelist, for he saw that his antagonist was fully his equal in the saddle. His only advantage lay in the superb training of his horse, and there he knew that no comparison could be made.

Ten minutes was enough to conquer the horse he rode, and then Dainty Lance looked toward Murieta, who said:

"You will ride up the valley, senior. Pause when opposite the black rock, and wait for the signal."

Dainty Lance bowed in silence and rode away, his heart beating fast, for upon the next few moments depended more than life. He had reasoned the matter out closely, and as there seemed to be but one point at which the valley could be quitted, he expected to be placed furthest from that point, up the valley. His plans were laid with that expectation, and it had come true.

The outlaws, including Joaquin, had secured elevated positions from whence they could observe every movement of the rivals without danger to themselves, expecting it to be a prolonged exhibition of equestrian skill before the duel could be terminated by a fatal shot or thrust, and for that reason giving the antagonists a wide field in which to maneuver.

Dainty Lance saw this—saw that Sibyl was already at the spot he had mentioned, and with drawn revolver he waited the signal for the onset.

It was not long delayed, and Dainty Lance dashed at full speed directly toward the Mexican, sitting erect in the saddle, his right arm extended as if about to fire.

This bold dash plainly disconcerted Florencio, who had calculated on more maneuvering, and he guided his animal in a diagonal course, sinking low down on the side opposite his enemy, discharging two shots from under his horse's neck, but without effect as far as his friends could see.

Then Dainty Lance fired—just the one shot, but as if stricken by a thunderbolt, the Mexican's horse plunged headlong to the ground, taking its rider wholly by surprise, and crushing him to a shapeless mass as it rolled over.

Swift as an arrow Dainty Lance sped on, and as the eyes of the outlaws were naturally turned upon their fallen companion, the bold scout reached Sibyl and raised her to the pommel of his saddle, then thundered down the valley with a defiant shout in response to the angry yells which now burst from the road-agents as they began to realize the truth.

Bullets began to whistle around the fugitives, but on they sped untouched, and nearing the pass, Dainty Lance laughed aloud with defiant joy, for he felt that they were all but saved!

At that moment two men sprung up from among the rocks, and as Dainty Lance leveled his pistol, a well known voice shouted:

"You're runnin' chuck into a trap, Lance! Take kiver here with us, an' we'll beat 'em off!"

It was Hardy Zeph who spoke! and Dainty Lance instantly wrenched up his horse, knowing that the warning must be true.

Loud yells of exultation came from the Mexicans, and they came on with renewed speed until Hardy Zeph turned and dropped the foremost man dead with a bullet through his heart. Then the outlaws faltered and came to a halt, fearing to be drawn into an ambush, hurriedly seeking cover as the revolver of the boy-trailer emphasized the hint given by his rifle.

"Down and cover!" cried Harry Ballou, excitedly, as Dainty Lance hesitated. "The gang from whom she escaped last night are even now in the pass. See—they come!"

It was only too true!

The narrow mouth of the pass was choked up by a mass of men on foot, who were evidently taking

a precautionary view of the state of affairs. At their head were Wilbur Mason and the Mad Hermit, and as the latter caught sight of those upon the black horse, a yell of mingled joy and rage burst from his lips, then he rushed forward with impetuous bounds.

Hardy Zeph saw and instantly recognized the man. Like a flash, all that he and Dainty Lance had suffered through the vengeful hatred of the Mad Hermit recurred to him, and with a yell even more fierce than that of the old man, he leveled his revolver and fired at the approaching figure.

The Mad Hermit stopped abruptly, clasped both hands to his breast, his head thrown back as though he was choking—then he fell heavily upon his face, lying without sound or motion.

CHAPTER XIV.

DAINTY LANCE'S SISTER.

JOAQUIN MURIETA, as soon as he beheld the pass blocked by the presence of an armed force, arose from his cover and uttered the signal of retreat. Swiftly the Mexicans scattered and fled, leaving their horses and all else to seek safety by scaling the rocky sides of the valley.

With Joaquin fled Clarina. Wilbur Mason saw them flee, but, ignorant of who they were, did not pursue. The fall of the Mad Hermit drew his attention to the spot from whence the shot was fired, and he recognized the form of Sibyl. His lips parted to order a charge, but the words were never spoken.

From the narrow pass behind them, the road-agents heard the clatter of iron-shod hoofs, and high above all else came the loud, terrible roar of the giant negro, who was in their midst the next moment, his huge club dealing death at every blow. And, close behind him rode Morgan's Man-Hunters, their revolvers ringing forth in death volleys.

Mason wheeled, in desperation, to see the blood-dripping club of Hercules raised for his destruction. His revolver exploded just as the club fell, and both dropped to the ground, the negro stunned, the outlaw dead, his skull crushed to atoms.

That shot was the only one fired by the road-agents. Taken so terribly by surprise, they thought not of resistance, and were butchered without mercy. Few prisoners of their class were ever taken. Merciless themselves, they received no mercy.

"On and capture Joaquin Murieta!" shouted Dainty Lance. "Yonder they go, over the rocks! On and take them!"

One or two of the fleeing Mexicans were still visible, and realizing the truth, the man-hunters ceased their work of slaughter and set off after higher game.

The sun was setting over the blood-stained valley. Three persons moved slowly away from where lay a white-haired corpse beside which, sobbing audibly, still knelt a huge form—Hercules mourning over his dead master and foster-brother.

Those three were Sibyl, Dainty Lance and Harry Ballou. They had heard Howard Glenn confess all, and now knew that they were brothers and sister. Only one of the trio could be said to be happy. It is not easy to accept a brother where one has loved as a wife—a sister instead of that nearest and dearest of all relationships. Not yet could those two feel resigned to the mysterious working of fate.

Later, the Man-hunters returned, baffled. They had lost the trail of the outlaws, and came back empty handed for their horses, swearing to hunt the country over inch by inch but what they would have Joaquin Murieta, dead or alive. It seems they came upon Hercules, just as he left the deserted cave, after his drugged sleep, and believing from his account that the band was that of Joaquin's, they took the trail at once, with the result here noted.

Two months later, a party of five stood upon the deck of a ship about to leave San Francisco. They were Sibyl, or Grace Ballou, her two brothers, Hardy Zeph and Hercules. She was begging, with tears in her eyes, that Dainty Lance would change his determination and return with them.

"No, it is better not," he said, with a sad, gentle smile. "If the time ever comes when I can bring myself to look upon you as never more than a very dear sister, then you will see me. Until then—farewell!"

He pressed his lips to her cold brow, then turned away and entered the boat which rowed him and Hardy Zeph back to the shore.

THE END.

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